The Greatest Humbug: P.T. Barnum and the Racial Politics of Nineteenth Century Human Exhibits

Patrick Clinch

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Advisor: Dr. W. Fitzhugh Brundage

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Abstract

This thesis explores the career of P.T. Barnum with the goal of understanding the relationship between nineteenth-century entertainment and the racial politics of the years before and after the demise of slavery. It argues that Barnum's displays of non-white human beings were, rather than an aberration, a fundamentally fitting reflection of the moral and political perspective of Northern white middle class Republicans who were anxious about the implications of racial change despite ostensible support for the cause of abolition and, often, for full citizenship rights for Black Americans. Racial displays of this kind blurred the lines between politics, science and entertainment, and allowed white audiences to reaffirm concepts of white supremacy over racial Others, while believing themselves to be consuming reflections of biological truth rather than racist myth. Barnum's ability to create participatory entertainments that invited audiences to judge their veracity gave a particular democratic nature to his exhibits which invited curiosity helped to solidify certain racial ideas in popular consciousness. These exhibits both reflected and anticipated the connections between racial pseudoscience and popular entertainment in Barnum's era and into the future of American popular culture.

Introduction

This thesis is a study of P.T. Barnum's continued exhibition of Black and non-white people as living curiosities throughout his career as a showman. It investigates the relationship between race-based human display, Barnum's personal political evolution, and the changing racial politics of the United States during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. It discusses the display of non-white, and particularly Black, living human subjects and what these entertainments reveal about the racial prejudices of Barnum's audiences and about Barnum himself. This thesis traces how these types of displays changed over the course of Barnum's career. It considers these displays in the context of a period of racial redefinition and seismic economic and political change in the nineteenth century and demonstrates how white urban anxieties were in conversation with Barnum's humbugs, in particular, those which featured living non-white human subjects. Additionally, it investigates Barnum's transition from a Northern Democrat into an abolitionist Republican in the 1850s and 1860s and explains how racial exhibits figured in the evolving moral outlook of their promoter and his audiences.

Phineas Taylor Barnum is one of the most widely known American figures from the nineteenth century. His immense success as a showman and his undeniable genius as a self-promoter made him one of the most recognizable Americans in the world in his own time, with his fame matching, and often surpassing that of any president, general, or literary icon of the age. His life, which spanned nearly the entire nineteenth century from his birth in Connecticut in 1810 until his death in 1891, saw him rise from a penniless rural troublemaker into the chief ambassador of American cultural identity. His American Museum in New York City, which he operated from 1841 to 1868, sold more than 82 million tickets in a period when the population of

the United States was just over 30 million people.[1] His circuses, European tours, and individual promotions attracted millions more, and his relentless advertisements and various innovations in the format of entertainment made him one of the most consequential figures in the development of American popular and commercial culture. Throughout his meteoric career, Barnum promoted various humbugs that earned him a reputation as both an untrustworthy huckster and insatiable money-lover. He would regularly misrepresent the nature of his exhibits, as in the case of the Feejee mermaid which, while advertised as a beautiful bare-breasted woman, was nothing more than a mummified monkey torso crudely sewn onto a fish tail. Meanwhile, he would often deliberately spread doubt in the press over the validity of his exhibits in order to drum up controversy and encourage audiences to make return visits and decide for themselves. Despite the moral suspicion many in the elite initially displayed toward Barnum's shameless spectacles, he successfully marketed his museum and, later, his circuses to middle-class families, ultimately blurring the lines between respectability and sensationalism. Several of his spectacles involved living human subjects, many of whom were Black people framed in ways that exploited the deep racism of nineteenth century America. These displays, and the degree to which they affected and reflected the changes in Barnum's personal outlook on race and the changes in American racial politics, more broadly, are the focus of this thesis.

Barnum's far-reaching influence, and the controversy that followed him throughout his career, remains tangible today. Either through attending one of the many performances of Barnum & Bailey's circus or through the popular film *The Greatest Showman,* contemporary Americans may know of P.T. Barnum as a promoter of the circus or as a shameless but kindly humbug who provided opportunity for social outcasts to perform. Others may have been recently

[1] Irving Wallace, "P.T. Barnum: American Showman," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 17, 2020. https://www.britannica.com/biography/P-T-Barnum.

reminded of Barnum's role in American history as the result of the series of comparisons of the showman to the former President Donald Trump in op-eds and articles from the last four years. An article from *Vanity Fair* from 2017 entitled "What Donald Trump and P.T. Barnum Have in Common" compared Barnum's famous brand of humbug to Trump's post-truth political rhetoric, another from the *Baltimore Sun* declared Trump the "authoritarian P.T. Barnum of politics," and an op-ed in the *New York Times* insisted that "No, Trump Is Not P.T. Barnum."[2] All these articles underscore the popular association between Barnum and a sensational disregard for the truth, while also spending time discussing whether Barnum's brand of humbug was the result of insatiable greed or an earnest desire to entertain and uplift the public. Other articles which appeared after the release of *The Greatest Showman*, a movie musical that featured a rosy and almost entirely fabricated version of Barnum's life, attempted to remind Americans that P.T. Barnum was far from the jolly, well-meaning character lovingly portrayed by Hugh Jackman. *Smithsonian Magazine* in 2017 released an article entitled "P.T. Barnum Isn't the Hero 'The Greatest Showman' Wants You to Think" which pointed out that the film does not address Barnum's pattern of presenting people of color as living curiosities nor does it portray his often casually exploitative attitude toward his performers.[3]

Recent historiography surrounding Barnum has been largely focused on responding to this popular discourse about a figure whose influence clearly remains salient in American culture. The most recent major biography, *Barnum: An American Life* by Robert Wilson, defends Barnum as a figure who, despite various moral failings, improved through his life and whose

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[2] Stephen Mimh, "No Trump Is Not P.T. Barnum," *The New York Times*, 19 December, 2017; Jennifer Mercieca, "Donald Trump: the authoritarian P.T. Barnum of Politics," *The Baltimore Sun*, 7 January 2021.; James Warren, "What Donald Trump and P.T. Barnum Have in Common," *Vanity Fair*, 10 November 2017.

[3] Jackie Mansky, ""P.T. Barnum Isn't the Hero 'The Greatest Showman' Wants You to Think," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 22 December 2017.

contributions to popular culture helped create a "distinctly American sense of optimism, industriousness, humor and relentless energy."[4] While Wilson addresses Barnum's racial presentations, he presents them as aberrations in an otherwise wondrous career of a man who was, in his later life, thoroughly apologetic about some of his more questionable exhibits. This work seems to have built upon a tradition begun with the influential 1989 biography from Barnum scholar A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man*, which attempts to shed light on Barnum's personal moral evolution and provide a more nuanced vision of Barnum beyond his popular reputation as a scurrilous humbug. This line of historiographical apologia is useful in that it largely succeeds in revealing Barnum to be a sensitive and morally conscious figure whose tendency to exaggerate was more a result of his deep understanding of his audience than a desire to dupe them out of their money. These works do not spend a great deal of time discussing Barnum's consistent promotion of racial exhibits, nor do they sufficiently attempt to reconcile these displays with Barnum's complex personal moral outlook or the larger social and political context of the period.

A separate body of work specifically considers the role of humbug in Barnum's career and uses humbug as a lens for investigating larger social and political themes of the nineteenth century. This tradition began with Neil Harris's 1973 book *Humbug: the Art of Barnum*, which recognized humbug as an appeal to the "vanities and conceits" of America's expanding democracy in the nineteenth century which "celebrated individual judgement" over the imposition of authority.[5] More recent works such as James W. Cook's *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, which spends much more time of racial exhibition than Harris's work, continue this line of thought and broaden it to suggest that humbug was a

[4] Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019)
[5] Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 4.

fitting format of entertainment for a century full of scientific advancement and increased access to travel and information. Cook proposes that the blurred lines between scientific fact and popular sensation in the period allowed for the prominence of deception and exaggeration as legitimate ways to attract audiences. This line of scholarship establishes the model that this thesis uses to discuss Barnum's racial displays. As such, this thesis treats Barnum's racial exhibitions as largely democratic and dialectical in nature, in that they were often voluntarily consumed, discussed and judged as commodities by their audiences, and considers them to be expressive of a certain nineteenth century desire among white American audiences for novelty, affirmations of racial superiority, and spectacles of biological wonder, for which humbug often served as the ideal vehicle.

Other recent works addresses Barnum's racial displays more directly, though this genre is more limited in scale than other Barnum historiography. Benjamin Reiss, in his 2001 book *The Showman and the Slave,* investigates the Joice Heth affair and focuses on the drawing of rigid racial boundaries in the antebellum period. Similar works, such as the essay "P.T. Barnum and Africa" by Bernth Lindfors, argue that Barnum's displays of Black people contributed to a sense of otherness among white audiences who were able to reassure themselves about the inferiority of non-white people in a period of perceived racial upheaval before the Civil War. This tradition of defining racial display as a method of establishing boundaries through a combination of paternalistic sympathy, curiosity, and racial prejudice serves as a model for understanding Barnum's various exhibitions of living non-white subjects, but also leaves room for an investigation into how different displays in different periods of Barnum's career may have functioned differently for audiences. These works also tend to frame Barnum as having been largely callous and unthinking about the impact of his racial exhibitions. While Barnum was

often cruel and exploitative toward the subjects of his racial exhibitions, the exhibitions themselves were not episodes of uncalculated money-grabbing, nor were they devoid of moral purpose. This thesis shows how racial displays were often an expression of a distinct moral outlook by Barnum, which contained racism as a fundamental component, rather than episodes of exceptional or unusual disregard for decency. In other words, this thesis explains how racial displays fit into the larger racial mythology and middle-class moralism of nineteenth century America, and determines how P.T. Barnum both reflected those myths and changed how they would be reproduced in entertainment for generations to come.

The body of primary sources that inform this thesis is vast, and posed a series of distinct challenges. P.T. Barnum wrote a famous autobiography in 1855, which he subsequently rewrote and re-released on several occasions, with each of the editions featuring slightly different accounts of the same events. These autobiographies were also commercial products, meant to make money and to advance Barnum's personal vindication against accusations of trickery, cruelty and money-grubbing. In this way, Barnum's autobiographical works must be understood largely as ego texts, which contain exaggeration and a certain brand of humor that can make discerning between earnest recollections and Barnum's winking hyperbole difficult. An exception to this challenge are the rare moments when Barnum discusses his political feelings in his autobiographies. These moments tended to lack Barnum's characteristic exaggeration and were seemingly expressions of earnest thoughts and reflections about his political outlook and career. As such, these moments were taken at face value and treated as accurate representations of Barnum's changing political attitudes throughout his life. The rest of Barnum's autobiographical work is used as a way of understanding how Barnum wished to be seen by the public, and as a tool for demonstrating his evolution on his ideas about racial display.

Two extensive collections of Barnum's personal letters and serial writings were used in addition to these texts. The first is A.H. Saxon's *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum* from 1983 which features just over 300 of Barnum's letters to friends and business partners from throughout his career. This collection proved crucial as Barnum's extant personal effects are spread out among several archives, libraries and personal collections throughout the nation that have been difficult to access during the COVID-19 pandemic. The other collection used is *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader,* edited by James W. Cook, which contains many of Barnum's earliest writings, some of which were written under a pen name, as well as several useful examples of contemporary reactions to Barnum's work. In the case of Saxon's collection, which is widely used as a resource by contemporary Barnum historians, it was a concern that, as a Barnum defender, Saxon may have left out certain unflattering material. However, several letters in the collection do not reflect particularly well on Barnum's character and it does not seem, upon further research into the listed sources of the collection, that any important letters had been left out. In addition to these edited collections of Barnum's writing, there were several letters, advertisements and photographs that are available via the Connecticut Digital Archive's P.T. Barnum Digital Collection. Also, the historical newspapers available on Newspapers.com proved useful in discovering press reactions to and advertisements for various Barnum exhibits from throughout his career. Finally, a series of letters, advertisements, newspaper clippings, images and speeches from or involving Barnum can be found using the online "Lost Museum" archive collection from the American Social History Project at the City University of New York.

This thesis begins by framing Barnum's early work as a showman in the social and political context of antebellum New York City. The first chapter tracks Barnum from his early days as an editor for a Connecticut newspaper to his presentation of the "What Is It?" in 1860. It

investigates the way changing racial and class dynamics in New York before the Civil War created fertile ground for Barnum's racial exhibits to become wildly popular. The second chapter explores Barnum's political evolution and the roots of his changing ideas about slavery and American democracy. It then connects Barnum's evolution with the changing form and content of Barnum's racial exhibits, and questions how P.T. Barnum, newly full of progressive fervor, could continue to display Black people as biologically inferior curiosities. The third chapter reveals that Barnum's late career represented the consummation of the moral and racial ideas that were hinted at in his earliest racial displays, with the Ethnological Congress of the 1880s featuring a combination of moralism, pseudoscientific spectacle and racial othering. Overall, this thesis shows that Barnum's racial displays were not exceptions to Barnum's self-advertised moralism, but were reflections of a moral sensibility that considered whiteness to be deeply connected to virtue, and that therefore favored presentations of Black Americans as both external from that whiteness and in need of white assistance in order to escape the perceived confines of their racial inferiority.

Chapter One: P.T. Barnum and Antebellum Urban Entertainment

Two Episodes

In 1882, P.T. Barnum, by that time the preeminent elder statesman of American entertainment, sent a circular letter to American consulates all throughout the world. He shared with them his vision for a grand human spectacle he would come to call the "Ethnological Congress."

> Dear Sir,
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> I desire to carry out as far as possible an idea I have long entertained of forming a collection, in pairs or otherwise, of all the uncivilized races in existence, and my present object is to ask you kindly to render me what assistance is in your power to acquire any specimens of these uncivilized peoples.
>
> My aim is to exhibit to the American public not only human beings of different races...
>
> ...With this object in view, I should be glad to receive from you descriptions of as many of such specimens as you could obtain, and photographs as far as possible, even if it is necessary to send an agent into the interior for this purpose.
>
> The remuneration of these people, in addition to their board and travelling expenses, is usually minimal. I shall see that they are presented with fancy articles such as are always acceptable and a small allowance monthly.
>
> If, in any case, a group of 3 to 6 or even 10 would be specially novel, I should probably take them, but I must study economy, inasmuch as I propose to add this 'Congress of Nations' to the other attractions of our great show without extra charge...[6]

Several consulates obliged. Barnum would succeed in obtaining hundreds of indigenous people from Africa, Australia, the Americas, Europe and Asia for display in his massive traveling circus. In 1884, he unveiled his spectacular human taxonomy at his Barnum & London Circus to much excitement. Advertised as an "Ethnological Congress of Strange and Savage Tribes," *The Boston Globe* called it "a dream of the Orient and a trip to the Occident combined."[7]

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[6] P.T. Barnum, Circular Letter to American Consulates, 1882.
[7] *The Boston Globe*, 17 January 1884. 2.

This new human exhibit would replace Barnum's "Congress of Monarchs," a procession of mostly white performers dressed in bombastic imperial costumes representing India, Turkey and several other exotic places.[8] In Barnum's mind, the Ethnological Congress would be larger, more instructive, more exciting and, most importantly, much more profitable. When the circus arrived in a new town, the Ethnological Congress would head up the opening procession, led by the eight-foot tall "Chang the Chinese Giant" and containing representatives from every continent all adorned in traditional garb.[9] "Burmese, Afghans, Nubian sheiks, Abyssinians, Fudians, Hindoos, Nautch dancing girls, Syrians, Zulus, Todas Indians and other curious human beings, all dressed in their native costumes," all marched by Barnum's elated patrons who, if they were lucky enough to be at the front of the crowd, were encouraged to touch the strange men and women as they passed.[10]

Nineteen years before the debut of the Ethnological Congress, P.T. Barnum stood on the floor of the Connecticut State House in Hartford. He had gotten himself elected to the seat representing Fairfield in 1865 for the sole and expressed purpose "to vote for the then proposed amendment to the Constitution of the United States, to abolish slavery for ever from the land."[11] During his term, a motion was proposed to allow free Black men to vote in Connecticut. Barnum supported the idea fervently, having come to see the Civil War as something of a divine struggle to bring about a true national democracy, once remarking, "Was there ever a struggle wherein

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[8] Advertisement, P.T. Barnum's Hippodrome at Back Bay in Boston, 3 August 1874. https://collections.ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/60002%3A3189#page/1/mode/2up

[9] "P.T. Barnum's Ethnological Congress," from PBS American Experience: "The Circus"

[10] Ibid.

[11] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 241.

the hand of a Beneficent and Almighty God was more plainly visible?"[12] He rose to speak on behalf of the measure on the 26th of May, 1865:

> The two learned and distinguished authors of the minority report have been studying the science of ethnology and have treated us with a dissertation on the races. And what have they attempted to show? Why, that a race which, simply on account of the colour of the skin, has long been buried in slavery at the South, and even at the North has been tabooed and scarcely permitted to rise above the dignity of whitewashers and boot-blacks, does not exhibit the same polish and refinement that the white citizens do who have enjoyed the advantages of civilization, education, Christian culture and self-respect which can only be attained by those who share in making the laws under which they live.
>
> Do our democratic friends assume that the negroes are not human? I have heard professed democrats claim even that; but do the authors of this minority report insist that the negro is a beast?[13]

Clearly, Barnum acknowledged that racial difference was a reflection of generational circumstance rather than the expression of insurmountable biological preconditions. Such a position, that free Black men could "catch up" culturally and participate in democracy at the same level as whites, while certainly reductive and paternalistic in tone, would have been regarded as quite progressive or even radical in a period when pseudoscientific conceptions of race pervaded public consciousness. Barnum, appealing to a sense of shared humanity, expresses a vision for a country that would not officially consider race a disqualifying attribute for the enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of citizenship. Of course, it is worth noting that when Barnum's Ethnological Congress was unveiled, after the political fervor of the war years had diminished and Reconstruction had failed to establish anything resembling racial equality, its "specimens" were displayed next to the animal menagerie.[14]

This chapter argues that Barnum's seemingly paradoxical approach to race described above grew out of the particular racial and cultural milieu of antebellum New York City.

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[12] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Daniel Stevens Dickinson, 7 June 1865.
[13] P.T. Barnum, Speech to Connecticut State House, 26 May 1865.
[14] Advertisement Poster, P.T. Barnum's Ethnological Congress of Strange and Savage Tribes, 1884.

Barnum's later political perspective, which can be generally described as Northern middle-class Republicanism, was defined by a deep allegiance to free-labor ideology, a distaste for perceived remnants of "Slave Power," and an abiding faith in meritocracy. This perspective was informed by earlier engagements with anti-establishment politics as well as Barnum's desire to make his efforts as a showman into acceptable, middle-class fare.[15] While Barnum often framed himself, and is often framed by biographers, as a somewhat apolitical figure dedicated only to profit and promoting the next spectacle, this chapter, in its description of Barnum's earlier life and the character of antebellum New York City, will reveal Barnum to be keenly aware of the political questions of his period and willing to engage with them both in his personal and public life. This chapter will demonstrate that Barnum's early experiences with politics and showmanship helped to inform this later understanding of race, class, entertainment and his own unique role in appealing to and informing public anxieties throughout his career.

Barnum's career, which began with the display of an enslaved woman named Joice Heth who he advertised as the living nursemaid of George Washington, was riddled with episodes of racial deception, always framing non-white, and particularly Black people as mysterious, primitive and deeply different. Barnum later apologized for his participation in the Joice Heth scheme, but this chapter will show how the Heth affair was less of an early career fluke and more of a model for Barnum's consistent use of non-white people to fan the curiosity and racial apprehension of his largely white, middle-class audiences. This chapter argues that P.T. Barnum's sensational racial displays and morally conscious public persona appealed to white middle-class anxieties about the prospect of competition from freed Black workers by insisting upon their biological and cultural inferiority, while also allowing his audience to maintain a

[15] Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 6.

sense of moral respectability. This complex strategy was the result not only of deep racism in the antebellum and Civil War period, but also of an urgent need for class definition in an increasingly urbanized, dynamic and politically divided American North.

Barnum's America

Phineas Taylor Barnum was born the day after his country's 34th birthday on July 5th, 1810 in Bethel, Connecticut. Called "Taylor" in his youth, he was the son of Philo and Irena Barnum who worked as farmers, owned a tavern, and supplemented their income by taking odd jobs, although they remained in a near constant state of economic uncertainty for most of Barnum's early life.[16] The Barnums were Congregationalists and ardent Democrats, but young Taylor's Unitarian-Universalist grandfather would guide Barnum to become a Universalist himself by his teenage years. Barnum revealed himself to be a talented entrepreneur from a young age, displaying what he called a certain "acquisitiveness."[17] He also had a penchant for spectacle, starting a fraudulent lottery at the age of sixteen and participating in a variety of practical jokes.[18]

Like so many of his contemporaries, the talented and massively energetic Barnum dreamed of escaping his tiny rural environment and heading to the rapidly expanding metropolis of New York City, which, after the completion of the Erie Canal in 1821, had become the undisputed economic capital of the region. A seventeen year-old Barnum got his first taste of urban life in 1827 after the store he was working at in Bethel closed down and opportunity in the Connecticut countryside for a young man of his talent seemed scarce. For a time he worked at a

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[16] P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs: Or Forty Years' Recollections of P.T. Barnum* (1869 version), ed. Carl Bode, (New York: Penguin, 1981), 21.
[17] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 15.
[18] Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 18.

porterhouse in Brooklyn where he often hosted friends pouring into the city from his home region. He would return home, however, to run a store and marry a tailor's daughter named Charity Hallett, with whom he had been corresponding ever since he had left Bethel.[19]

Barnum seems to have tired of his provincial existence, engaging in numerous entrepreneurial enterprises to try and make some money and a name for himself. He ran both a semi-fraudulent lottery and a Unitarian-Democratic newspaper called *the Herald of Freedom*. The newspaper was a vociferous critic of Calvinist dominance in Connecticut and supported a Jacksonian style of democracy; open to all, sympathetic to the common man, and averse to rigid institutions exemplified by the Congregationalist church. The paper was headed with a quote from Thomas Jefferson, "For I have sworn upon the Altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man," joined by the feminine personifications of Truth, Justice and Liberty.[20]

When Barnum did finally arrive in New York for good, it was in the wake of controversy and economic desperation. In 1832, he was arrested for libel for accusations made against a Congregationalist acquaintance in the *Herald*.[21] He was prevented from speaking in his defense because of his Unitarian beliefs, the result of residual influence from the once legally established Congregationalist Church on the public life of Connecticut.[22] His sixty day sentence and release would become a small press sensation as he wrote to the editors of several newspapers from jail framing his sentence as a blatant injustice attributable to the undue influence of Congregationalists and Federalists on the court. Writing to Gideon Welles of the *Hartford Times* he expressed his sense of purpose in accepting his sentence, "the *people* are more enlightened

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[19] P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs*, 70.
[20] *Herald of Freedom*, 5 December 1832. 1.
[21] Wilson, *Barnum*, 24.
[22] Ibid.

than in the days of Calvin, and they will upon reading my trial express their indignation at such oppression and persecution."[23] Barnum ensured *The Herald* continued printing while he served his sentence, with the December 5th edition proclaiming that, "P.T. Barnum... is now sounding plaudits on the freedom of the press, through the gates of Danbury jail."[24] Upon his release a parade hailing him as a martyr for Democratic values would welcome him back to Bethel. The parade, which Barnum likely organized for himself, was the first of many crowds he would draw in his long life. In 1834, however, just as Barnum was establishing himself as a preeminent regional voice for the Democratic party, the Connecticut legislature officially outlawed lotteries. With his main source of income outlawed, Barnum and his young wife were forced to leave Bethel in search of greener pastures.

These early experiences reveal not only Barnum's budding skill as a huckster and media-savvy public figure, but also his very real passion for the political debates of his time and place. Though Barnum clearly used *The Herald* as a means for advertising his lottery and, in many ways, himself, he also seems to have truly believed in its purpose as a mouthpiece for the non-Congregationalist Democratic minority in his region. He once wrote to a fellow Democrat, Zalmon Windman about his work as a political advocate observing, "all that can be done by me will be, and I have still good hopes that the intriguing serpent will have his head bruised by the heel of Jackson Democracy." The "serpent" was a reference to a Federalist judge.[25] Later in life, and especially just before, during and after the Civil War, Barnum would remain a vocal political actor, applying a great deal of his seemingly limitless energy to exhibitions and lectures with explicit political intent. This passion suggests a Barnum more

[23] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Gideon Welles, 7 October 1832.
[24] *Herald of Freedom*, 5 December 1832. 3.
[25] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Zalmon Windman, 15 May 1833.

engaged with events beyond himself than the self-interested trickster so often portrayed. Barnum's natural political awareness as a young man helps to frame his later career as a showman and politician, and suggests an impresario acutely aware of how his exhibitions might affect, define or come into dialogue with the political or social feelings of his audience.

New York, New York

Barnum settled in New York City with his wife and child in a home in lower Manhattan in 1834.[26] The city would come to host the crown jewel of Barnum's entertainment empire. In the years prior to Barnum's permanent relocation, New York experienced a transformation. Though long a regional center for trade, business and government, New York, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, become the preeminent metropolis and de facto cultural capital of the United States. The population of Manhattan quintupled from 1800 to 1830 fueled by an expansion in trade with the interior via the Erie Canal and the rise of steamboats as a means of traveling to the growing city, which was itself rapidly consuming the better part of the once swampy, forested island.[27] New York's share of international imports coming to America also exploded in this period, from 38 percent in 1821 to 62 percent in 1836, making the growing city the vein through which most goods from Europe and Asia flowed into the young republic.[28] All this activity attracted hordes of people from the countryside looking to purchase goods, trade wares, find jobs, reinvent themselves or to simply enjoy the unmatched activity. Barnum was among these

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[26] Wilson, *Barnum*, 29.
[27] Shlomo Angel, Patrick Lamson-Hall "THE RISE AND FALL OF MANHATTAN'S DENSITIES, 1800-2010" Working Paper 18, NYU Marrion Institute of Urban Management, 15.
[28] Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 435.

provincial transplants who came to the city in search of something beyond what rural Connecticut had to offer.

To accommodate these teeming masses hotels, taverns, dance halls, retail storefronts, and European-style restaurants sprang up.[29] In 1828, the same year Barnum arrived in New York, Niblo's Garden, a pleasure ground and entertainment space featuring plays and traveling acts, opened to the public.[30] It would soon become the venue for his first spectacular and controversial effort as a showman. In just a few decades, an entire industry of urban hospitality and entertainment was born. Leisure was, for the freshly arrived residents of New York City, serious business. Going out to see a show or take in a spectacle represented an opportunity to find community and to present status. For a struggling but intelligent urban denizen like Barnum, separated from family ties and local reputation and with few obvious prospects for social advancement, differentiating oneself from the lower classes and achieving respectability was paramount. Such was the cultural birth of the "middle-class," brought into being by urban transplants who trusted that presenting a set of moral values could, as historian Jennifer Goloboy observes, "help them transcend their lowly origins and find success."[31] In other words, for the new residents of New York City, a positive moral reputation could mean economic and social security. Venues like Niblo's appealed directly to the sensibility of this aspiring middle-class, offering entertainments designed for "an intellectual mind" that would grant "useful knowledge."[32]

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[29] Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham*, 437.
[30] *The Evening Post*, 1 July 1828, 3.
[31] Jennifer L. Goloboy, "The Early American Middle Class," *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 25, No. 4 (2005): 537-545.
[32] *Brooklyn Evening Star*, 12 October 1843.

The actual content of these entertainments may not have always lived up to the claims of advertisements, but the rise of the penny press in the opening decades of the nineteenth century allowed promoters to define how their exhibitions ought to be understood by the public. New York became the epicenter of a reading revolution in the antebellum period, with myriad newspapers and periodicals offering the public information in a faster, cheaper and more accessible form than any other city in the country.[33] By 1830, New York had forty-seven individual daily newspapers and this number would continue to grow through the century. By 1833, over a million newspapers were shipped monthly from New York around the country.[34] The low price of these papers ensured that low or middle-income readers could access them, contributing to a more democratic exchange of information.[35] It must have felt, for those who arrived in New York from the countryside, as though the world was suddenly at their fingertips. It was this information revolution that Barnum so masterfully employed to his benefit during the first decades of his career.

On the Fourth of July, 1827, deep in the midst of this early century urban transformation, the last slaves in New York State were freed.[36] This mass emancipation, the largest single emancipation in the United States until 1865, was the culmination of a process of gradual abolition initiated in 1799. In New York City, Black citizens conducted a parade to celebrate the total end of bondage, but the celebration was limited so as not to draw the ire of white neighbors.[37] The end of slavery meant, in theory, that previous codifications of racial difference

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[33] Isabel Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 36.
[34] Gotham, 440-41.
[35] Isabel Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page*, 36.
[36] Daniel J. Walkowitz, Lecture 12, "African-Americans in Antebellum New York and New York Abolitionism" from NYU Open Ed., 8 October 2011.
[37] Gotham, 546.

were now obsolete, and that Black workers could now compete for jobs with the growing white middle and lower classes. In actual fact, Black workers were systematically kept from participating fully in the booming urban economy, but this did not prevent the issue of race from taking on a distinct class connotation. The rapid alterations to traditional economic existence for so many, brought on by the rise of wage labor and the transition from clearly defined rural social relations to the ever-changing competitive atmosphere of city life, gave race a particular salience in antebellum New York.

This tension was exacerbated, to some degree, by the fact that New York was at the same moment becoming a center for the national abolitionist movement, serving as the headquarters of the American Anti-Slavery Society after 1840.[38] The growth of the press industry created space for abolitionist and civil rights newspapers like the *Freedom's Journal*, published by newly freed African-Americans, and reprints of the influential Boston paper *The Liberator,* published by the powerful white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. In July of 1834, around the time of the seventh anniversary of state emancipation, racial resentments in New York City boiled over in the form of anti-abolition riots. Rumors that abolitionists were advocating miscegenation were spread by the *Courier and Enquirer* as well as other papers and led to mass public outrage. The *Evening Post* wrote, "A mad spirit has gone abroad among our populace- a spirit excited in part, no doubt, by the proceedings and inflammatory publications of the Abolitionists, as they are called; but in even greater measure by the violent tirades of certain prints opposed to the Abolitionists- the *Commercial Advertiser* and *Courier and Enquirer* in particular."[39] The riots ended only after military intervention, $20,000 of damages and a disclaimer released by the

[38] Daniel J. Walkowitz, Lecture 12, "African-Americans in Antebellum New York and New York Abolitionism"
[39] *The Evening Post*, 11 July 1834, 2.

American Anti-Slavery Society promising that they did not support "any desire to promote or encourage intermarriages between white and coloured persons."[40]

This was the New York of P.T. Barnum's earliest days as a showman; a city defined by anxieties over class and race, and where the objectionable and the upstanding existed in close quarters on the same block, in the same crowded boarding house, or on the same printed page. The struggle to define oneself was a daily project for most who arrived in America's first true metropolis, requiring thoughtful performances of social, racial or moral roles and a strategic use of new urban public spaces as a stage for these performances. As historian Sven Beckert observes while describing the claustrophobic and eclectic New York of the antebellum period, "This environment of toil, exertion, and sweat was more than an aesthetic affront; it symbolized the unprecedented openness and democratic dynamism of the city's shared spaces. Indeed, as nowhere else in the mid–nineteenth-century world, all social groups vied for the control of New York's public space and public sphere."[41] For the ascendant middle-class, control of these spaces would become a cultural priority throughout the century, and Barnum, always keeping an eye on the desires of his crowd, would play directly to this impulse throughout his career.

Washington's Nursemaid

Into this environment Barnum, then twenty-five years old and working as a grocer to make ends meet, introduced his first spectacle. The "spectacle" in question was an elderly enslaved woman named Joice Heth. Barnum recalled later that a Connecticut acquaintance named Coley Bartram contacted him in July of 1835 to inform him about a "remarkable negro woman" who, it was

[40] *The Times* (London), 8 August 1834, 2.
[41] Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the Bourgeoisie*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 47-48.

said, was no less than 161 years old and had served as nursemaid to George Washington.[42] At the time Heth was being presented by one R.W. Lindsay in Philadelphia. Barnum, who claims in his autobiography to have been convinced of the veracity of Heth's age and "anxious to become the proprietor of this novel exhibition," traveled there and purchased the rights to display Heth in New York for $1000, taking out a $500 loan and leaving the grocery business behind for good.[43]

Barnum displayed Heth at Niblo's Garden, offering spectators the chance to ogle at the alleged nursemaid for 25¢ a piece.[44] Barnum promoted Heth with a vigorous combination of appeals to the raw curiosity and fervent patriotism of the age. The Revolution was, at the time, still within living memory, and the Jacksonian energy of the moment added to a sense that the vision of the founders was coming to fruition.[45] The ability for anyone with a loose quarter to interact with the woman who Barnum claimed "raised" George Washington represented a chance for the average individual to engage directly with national myth. Of course, patriotic fervor over Washington's Nursemaid was mixed with a public preoccupation with racialist pseudoscience. Heth was, at the time, partially paralyzed, unable to move one of her arms or either of her legs, and was likely totally blind, but was "pert and sociable," and able to speak and sing.[46] Barnum ensured that she performed popular hymns and advertised her as having been "baptised in the Potomack river.. and takes great pleasure in conversing with ministers and religious persons."[47] Her strange appearance, improbable age and expressive Christianity served to create a patchwork of the antebellum racial imagination, which often cast Black Americans as simultaneously

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[42] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 38.
[43] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum,* 38.
[44] *The Evening Post*, 21 August 1835. 3.
[45] Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 19.
[46] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum*, 38
[47] *The Evening Post*, 20 August 1835. 3.

strange, unquestioningly religious, and naturally subordinate. Barnum, an acute salesman from his earliest days, realized that this basic formula which appealed to the public's desire for national pride and racial definition, would have to change as he took Heth on a tour of the more anti-slavery New England.[48] In a likely attempt to deflect abolitionist critique of his racial display, Barnum began to inform journalists that "the net proceeds" were, "intended to purchase the freedom of five of her great-grandchildren who are slaves."[49] This sort of broad moral appeal did not, however, replace Barnum's reliance on pseudo-biological intrigue. When Heth died in 1836, Barnum promoted and sold tickets to her autopsy as an opportunity for medical students to understand her advanced age.[50]

Joice Heth was far from the only example of racial display in the United States or during Barnum's career. The nineteenth century was awash with various episodes of human spectacle, blackface performance and pseudoscientific exhibitions. Barnum had developed a method of engaging in racial display that could simultaneously satisfy public anxiety over race and the deep need for moral respectability. This formula would remain at the core of many of his later racial displays. He later expressed regret for his involvement with the Heth exhibit, calling it, "the least deserving of all my efforts in the showline." His expressed regret, much like Barnum's indirect appeal to abolitionism in promoting Heth, amounts to a conscious retroactive attempt to provide his character with a morally acceptable hue.[51] After Heth's death, Barnum continued his trajectory toward showmanship and his reliance on race for entertainment, once claiming to have

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[48] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 7-8.
[49] *Middlebury Free Press*, 29 September 1835, 2.
[50] P.T. Barnum, *Struggles and Triumphs: Or Forty Years' Recollections of P.T. Barnum* (1869 version), ed. Carl Bode, (New York: Penguin, 1981), 83.
[51] P.T. Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 36.

donned blackface himself to sing "negro songs" when a singer left his employ.[52] He promoted John Diamond, "the best negro dancer in America," a white blackface performer in 1840, latching on to the growing popularity of minstrelsy in that period.[53] Eventually Barnum became the proprietor of the American Museum on Broadway, which would come to house many of Barnum's most famous curiosities from the Fiji Mermaid to the Wooly Horse. The Museum would also feature racial displays similar to the sideshow humbugs of his early career, but with the added character of being in a museum that Barnum often advertised as family-friendly, intellectually stimulating and scientifically informative.

A Superfluity of Novelties: Barnum's Museum and Racial Display

A walk along the street at the corner of Broadway & Ann in the spring of 1860 would reveal all the urban spectacles of mid-century New York. A fashionable neighborhood where people walked to "see and be seen," the streets would have been crowded with well-dressed pedestrians, alluring storefronts and passing carriages.[54] Despite visceral political tension in the largely Democratic city over the coming presidential election, people flocked to this block in search of a pleasant afternoon. The Astor House, one of the first true luxury hotels in New York, St. Paul's Chapel and City Hall would have surrounded these throngs of the respectable, and made the corner of Broadway & Ann into the epicenter of the ever-accelerating nineteenth-century urban lifestyle.[55] Among these halls of high culture, government and religion stood the preeminent cathedral of urban entertainment: P.T. Barnum's American Museum.

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[52] P.T. Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum*, 44.
[53] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Courtney Wemyss, 21 January 1840.
[54] Robert Wilson, *Barnum,* 54.
[55] Edward Anthony and Henry T. Anthony. Photograph of Broadway from Barnum's Museum Looking North, 1860. see Figure 2.

A five-story building painted a stunning shade of bright white and adorned with American flags and enlarged depictions of animals and curiosities one might find inside, Barnum's Museum would have stood out conspicuously from the steeples and muted buildings of Broadway.[56] Standing outside of the pearl-colored building, passers-by would be assailed by music from a brass band playing from a patio above. A great line for tickets curving around the corner onto Ann Street would contain people of varying backgrounds, some New Yorkers, some tourists, some with children, some without. Almost all of these patrons would have been white and well-off enough to allow for some leisure time and bit of frivolous spending. On at least one occasion, however, in 1849, Barnum allowed "respectable colored persons" to visit the museum from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., perhaps in an attempt to broadcast a charitable sensibility.[57] Stepping inside after paying the 25¢ entrance fee, the patrons of Barnum's wonder house would be presented with a full-frontal assault on the senses, what Barnum called a "superfluity of novelties."[58] Barnum's purported goal of having one of everything the world had to offer had garnered exhibits as varied as live rhinoceroses, a to-scale replica of Niagara Falls, "Indian" war clubs, and an albino family that Barnum claimed were the white descendants of a Madagascar tribe.[59] The adjacent Lecture Room, open every afternoon, also presented varied acts. As Barnum put it:

> The transient attractions of the Museum were constantly diversified, and educated dogs, industrious fleas, automatons, jugglers, ventriloquists, living statuary, tableaux, gipsies, Albinoes, fat boys, giants, dwarfs, rope-dancers, live "Yankees," pantomime, instrumental music, singing and dancing in great variety, dioramas, panoramas, models of Niagra, Dublin, Paris, and Jerusalem; Hannington's dioramas of the Creation, the Deluge, Fairy Grotto, Storm at Sea; the first English Punch and Judy in this country, Italian Fantoccini, mechanical

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[56] P.T. Barnum, *Barnum's American Museum Illustrated*, (New York: Van Norden and Leslie, 1850), 7.
[57] *The New York Tribune*, 27 February 1849.
[58] P.T. Barnum, *Struggles & Triumphs*, 106.
[59] Ibid. 109.

> figures, fancy glass-blowing, knitting machines and other triumphs in the mechanical arts; dissolving views, American Indians, who enacted their warlike and religious ceremonies on the stage, -- these, among others, were all exceedingly successful.[60]

This orgy of spectacle, which Barnum sold as both wondrous and instructive, was, by the 1860s, the preeminent institution in the nation not only for both public entertainment and for the exploration of the growing popular curiosity of the age. It would have taken the average patron several hours and multiple visits to consume the impossible number of curiosities on display, and Barnum ensured that these displays changed often enough that return trips were all but a necessity. In a period where natural science and mechanical advancement had captured the imagination of many, Barnum's American Museum had become New York's point of connection with the wider world.

A Nondescript

Barnum's self-advertised intent to inform the public with spectacle would provide him with a strangely influential position in the realm of popular science. His display of several genuine animal taxidermies and artifacts from around the world provided an air of moral and intellectual purpose to his more carnivalesque exhibitions. The inclusion of racial spectacle in this mixture served as a legitimizing force for cultural and racial hierarchy, separating the largely white, middle-class viewer from the exotic Black other. One of Barnum's most brazen and popular racial curiosities was his presentation of a microcephalic Black man named William Henry Johnson who Barnum marketed as the "What Is It?," challenging guests to decide if he represented "lower order of man? A higher order of monkey? Or... both in combination?"[61] Barnum dressed the diminutively statured Johnson in a furry costume and encouraged him to

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[60] P.T. Barnum, *Struggles & Triumphs,* 103.
[61] *The New York Tribune*, 1 March 1860.

speak in inarticulate grunts or an incomprehensible "'cheeping' noise."[62] Barnum unveiled the "What Is It?" exhibit only a few months after the release of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, clearly aiming to capture and augment the public's imagination surrounding natural science with a blatant racial appeal.[63] For audiences, this spectacle gave license to a social gaze that allowed them to assert their position as the cultural arbiter while providing a feeling of wonder and sympathetic condescension. For Barnum, William Johnson represented an evolution of strategy from his earlier racial exhibitions. This time, Barnum would allow the audience to decide for themselves whether or not Johnson was a human boy or a newly discovered species. He advertised deliberately vague descriptions of the discovery of the "nondescript" in Gambia by African explorers and left intact the scientific "mystery" of his precise origin. Visitors to the museum were welcome to impose their own racial or scientific ideas onto the exhibit, while Barnum eschewed the need to convince his audiences of the veracity of his elaborate humbug.

The "What Is It?" had a particular appeal in a moment of intense debate over political issue of slavery, which, in the election year of 1860, was in the process of tearing the union apart. The presentation of a Black, apparently biologically inferior "missing link" provided fodder for anti-Lincolnites who were more than happy to allude to the exhibit in their admonitions against the anti-slavery candidate. In a speech to a New York crowd from November of 1860, a Democratic lawyer said of a Lincoln presidency; "you will find the negro by your sides in every relation of life... in the Assembly chamber, in the halls of Congress, in the Senate, and who can tell but in time some lineal descendent of Barnum's "What Is It?" may be

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[62] *The New York Tribune*, 1 March 1860.
[63] The Lost Museum Archive at CUNY, "The What Is It Exhibit," https://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/exhibit/what/

raised to those honors for which the hatchet faced man of rail splitting fame now aspires."[64] Another, more direct political cartoon entitled "An Heir to the Throne or The Next Republican Candidate" displayed Lincoln presenting a caricature of William Johnson as the next candidate for president and declaring that "this intellectual and noble creature," could "prove the superiority of the Colored over the Anglo-Saxon race."[65] The "What Is It?" was not only appreciated by pro-slavery elements, however. The noted pro-union, anti-slavery diarist New York lawyer George Templeton Strong described Johnson writing, "his anatomical traits are frightfully simian – he's a great fact for Darwin."[66] Clearly, the "What Is It?" exhibit had a draw across political lines among middle class visitors, which both reflects and anticipates the way race functioned as a means of class consolidation for white urbanites throughout the nineteenth century. The "nondescript" nature of the exhibit allowed visitors to attach varying political and racial attitudes to the presentation of a Black man as an ape-like creature. Scientific curiosity, racial anxiety and a need for class definition were all present in Barnum's presentation of Johnson and in the reaction of his audiences.

Barnum's racial presentations had cultural and political consequences for his audience. In a period where tension over issues of class, race and the expansion of slavery were reaching a fever-pitch, Barnum's promotion of curiosities like Johnson seemed to throw coals in the fire of the intense political discussions which surrounded him. Barnum's deliberate, racially charged appeal to these anxieties was, in many ways, a calculated marketing strategy aimed at latching onto the fears and passions of the urban public. Barnum, however, in the years leading up to the Civil War, was experiencing something of a political transformation, one which cannot be easily

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[64] *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1 November 1860, 2.
[65] *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, 15 December 1860. See Figure 1.
[66] George Templeton Strong, George Templeton Strong Diary, Vol. 3, 322, 2 March 1860.

reconciled with his consistent use of racial display in this period. This political transformation, born out of a mixture of Northern patriotism, religious fervor, revulsion at the rise of factional violence in the 1850's and enthusiasm for a Lincoln candidacy, saw Barnum abandon his traditional support of the Democratic party and become a pro-union, abolitionist Republican. In the next chapter, the episodes of racial display and Barnum's early experiences in antebellum New York will be held up against this wartime political shift and will reveal the complex nature of Barnum's role in the roiling debates over emancipation, suffrage and the meaning of Union victory.

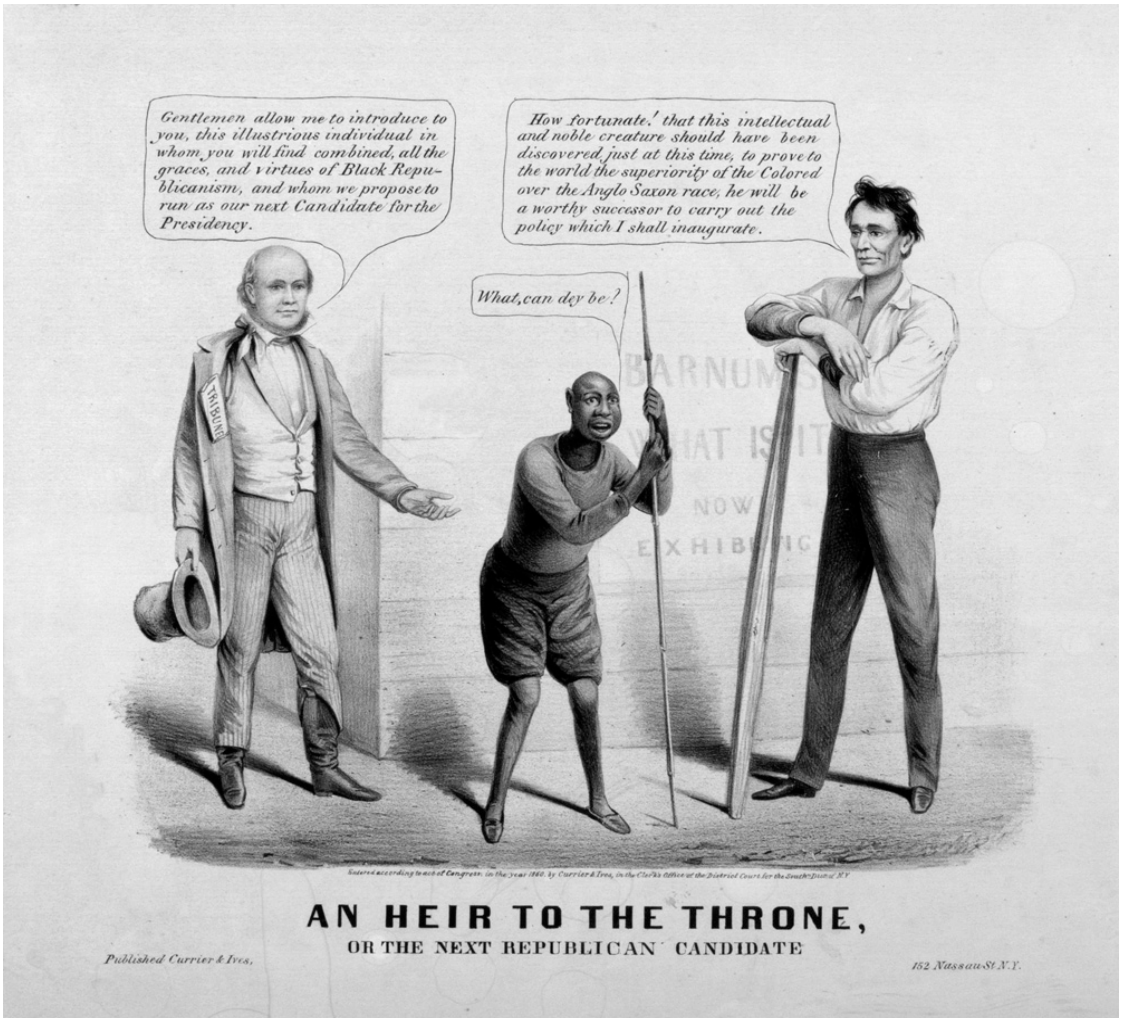

Fig. 1. Currier & Ives, "An Heir to the Throne or the Next Republican Candidate," Political Cartoon featuring William Henry Johnson as Barnum's "What Is It?" as a Republican politician, 1860. https://lostmuseum.cuny.edu/archive/an-heir-to-the-throne-or-the-next-republican

Fig. 2. Edward Anthony and Henry T. Anthony, *Broadway from Barnum's Looking North*, 1860. Anthony's Instantaneous Views N. 321, published by E. & H.T. Anthony & Co. Robert N. Dennis Collection of Stereoscopic Views, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, The New York Public Library, Astor and Lenox Tilden Foundations. https://visualizingnyc.org/broadway-and-ann/over-time/1860s-1870s-2/

Chapter Two: Changing Attitudes

A "New Departure"

In 1860, on the eve of the Civil War and in the midst of a contentious presidential election, P.T. Barnum decided it was time for a "new departure."[67] He abandoned his traditional political allegiances and joined the Republican party. P.T. Barnum's impassioned conversion to Republicanism seems unlikely when put into the context of his previously rigid support for the Democratic party, his expressed reticence about political involvement, and his dubious attitude toward slavery, which before the 1850s seems to have wavered between callousness and nonchalance. This unlikely transformation, driven by a mixture of Barnum's personal reflection, his deep desire to be seen as a morally upright social contributor, and his reaction to the heated political moment of the 1850s, serves as a guide for understanding how mid-nineteenth century entertainment was informed by and in conversation with the political upheaval of the age. It also provides insight into how Barnum, who eventually professed his faith in the possible equality of the races, was so willing to continue promoting racial displays infused with pseudoscientific prejudice throughout his career. Barnum's shifting politics and their relationship with his role as a showman represent the culmination of Barnum's interest in achieving middle-class respectability for his Museum, and display a larger shift in the willingness of Northern elites to address slavery head-on during the crisis of the 1850s and the Civil War. His evolution also foreshadowed the broader outlook of middle-class Republicans after the war who, while interested in preventing the return to power of the slaveholding Southern aristocracy, often

[67] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 238.

deprioritized their responsibility toward newly freed Black citizens in favor of establishing a racially restrictive class identity.

Barnum Reformed

During and after the Civil War, Barnum was a proud Republican and an increasingly unabashed political animal. He ran as a Republican for a seat in the Connecticut state legislature in 1865 and again in an ill-fated 1867 campaign for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, which he lost in characteristically spectacular fashion to his own staunchly Democratic cousin William H. Barnum.[68] Barnum joined the Republican party when "secession threatened in 1860," determining that the extreme rhetoric of the pro-slavery elements in the Democratic party justified a "new departure" from his former political identity.[69] Wooed by the "exciting campaign" of Abraham Lincoln, Barnum became a vociferous and enthusiastic supporter of the second Republican presidential candidate.[70] During the campaign Barnum was sure to illuminate "every window" at his estate at Lindencroft when a procession of Wide Awakes passed by, and even made his servants secretly light candles at a Democratic neighbor's home as a practical joke.[71]

Throughout the Civil War Barnum was highly supportive of both President Lincoln and the Union cause. He paid for three substitutes to fight in the Union army on his behalf despite being too old to serve himself and was active in combatting the anti-war or "Copperhead" sentiment common among many of his Connecticut neighbors. After helping to break up a

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[68] Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1973), 189.
[69] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 238.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.

"peace" meeting in Fairfield, one of many such meetings held throughout the North after the Union defeat at the Battle of Bull Run in 1861, Barnum wrote to Abraham Lincoln bragging that his pro-Union activities had "rendered Secessionists *so scarce*, I cannot find one for exhibition at my Museum."[72] Barnum clearly supported President Lincoln's intention to prosecute the war until the union was restored and slavery vanquished, and he was keen to assist the Union cause in any way he could:

> I trust in God and Liberty that ere long this rebellion will be crushed and the Union, stronger than ever restored... I know this thing from beginning to end, and I know it is the damnedest barbarous, mean and causeless rebellion ever known... I have been shocked and disappointed to see the English nation taking sides with the political slaveholders. But never mind. History will set this matter right, and I am doing all in my power to assist in *making history* about these times.[73]

Barnum's desire to "make history," and his fervent political feelings were reflected in exhibits in his Museum. Throughout the war Barnum featured wax figures of Union generals, a drummer boy who had been injured at Fredericksburg, and patriotic plays in the lecture room like *Anderson*, a dramatization of Major Robert Anderson's heroic attempts to hold Fort Sumter.[74] In 1862, Barnum himself was invited to the White House along with Commodore Nutt, a dwarf who Barnum presented as a great admiral, where Lincoln happily received them as entertaining but sincere and reliable supporters of the Union cause.[75] All this adds up to an image of the essentially progressive, politically conscious Barnum who would deliver a speech in favor of universal male suffrage in the Connecticut State house in 1865. But how did this Barnum come

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[72] P.T. Barnum, Letter to President Abraham Lincoln, 30 August 1861.
[73] P.T. Barnum to Thomas Brettell, 10 October 1862.
[74] Robert Wilson, 200.
[75] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 223.

into being? What changed within the Democratic Barnum who was previously unconcerned and untroubled by the issue of slavery?

Shifting Perspective

Young Barnum was assured in his political identity, once declaring that, "if there was a drop of blood in me that was not democratic, I would let it out if I had to cut the jugular vein."[76] Though he avoided explicit discussion of politics during the first years of his life as an impresario, Barnum's exhibitions were far from entirely apolitical. Barnum's Museum itself represented a kind of Jacksonian ideal, breaking away from the scholarly tradition of museums and presenting what Neil Harris calls an "operational aesthetic;" a model of presentation which invited average men and women to develop opinions as to the validity of the Museum's many strange exhibits and to feel themselves authoritative participants rather than simple onlookers.[77] Historian James W. Cook describes the Joice Heth incident as an example of participatory viewership, contending that the Heth exhibit represented "the artful repositioning of the... audience from the role of the observer to the observed, looking and laughing here not only at Heth but at each other."[78] The audiences who paid to see Heth were likely suspicious of her purported age and relation to George Washington, but, according to Cook, this suspicion added to a sense of authority to decide for oneself whether Barnum's tall tale was true, and perhaps to laugh at those who fell for the fabrication. In this way, Barnum's humbugs were not malicious condescensions to an

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[76] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 238.
[77] Neil Harris, Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), 59-62.
[78] James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 9.

unwitting audience, but invitations to discern for oneself whether an exhibition was genuine or fraudulent, and to watch to see if less-discerning viewers would fall for the trick. He once wrote, "the public appears disposed to be amused even when they are conscious of being deceived."[79] In this way, Barnum's exhibitions were amusing expressions of an egalitarian ideal, at least for their almost exclusively white middle-class audiences.

Barnum's Democratic feelings expressed themselves in the form of ardent American patriotism. He once wrote to the fellow museum-owner Moses Kimball while abroad in London about his intention to create a display dedicated to the American Revolution for view by the British public, complete with military imagery and portraits of presidents, "though on the whole I only care for those of Washington & Jefferson & *Jackson*!"[80] By the mid-1840s, however, it was possible to detect changes in Barnum's political identity which foreshadowed his future shift to Republicanism. In that same letter to Moses Kimball, Barnum expressed his excitement that Kimball had become a "strong National Republican," in this case likely referring to the American Republican party, a Boston branch of the "Know-Nothings," which held anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant nativist positions in the 1840s.[81] Barnum declared proudly that, upon his return home, he would, "go that ticket," explaining, "It's time to fight against foreign interference in our elections..."[82] This observation represents Barnum's first indication of his alienation with the mainstream Democratic party, which in the 1840s was actively courting Irish immigrants to its ranks, especially in New York City. Know-Nothings, while largely xenophobic and anti-immigrant, sometimes supported several progressive measures which would one day be woven

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[79] P.T. Barnum, *Life of P.T. Barnum,* (1855 version), 153.
[80] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Moses Kimball, 30 January 1845.
[81] Stephen Nemeth, "Know-Nothing Party," in Larry J. Sabato, Howard R. Ernst, *Encyclopedia of American political parties and elections* (2nd ed.), (Facts on File, 2014).
[82] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Moses Kimball, 30 January 1845.

into strands of Republicanism. These included various combinations of a strong commitment to free and fair labor, an anti-slavery position and a general feeling that the leading parties of the day, Democrats and Whigs, were controlled by patrician power-brokers who cared little for the circumstances of the average American worker.[83] Barnum, it seems, was most concerned politically in his early years with the sanctity of American democracy as he understood it. His distrust of the Congregationalist church, Connecticut Federalists and later Catholic immigrants demonstrates an apparent belief that democracy would only flourish when removed from the influence of rigid institutions and "foreign" elements. Barnum did not, however, officially abandon the Democratic party when he returned from Europe.

Temperance and Moral Entertainment

Around this same moment in his life, Barnum was becoming interested in the temperance movement. He pledged himself in the fall of 1847 "never again to take part in such spirituous liquors as a beverage," after witnessing what he described as "so much intoxication" during a visit to the New York State Fair.[84] In another letter to Moses Kimball in 1848, Barnum announced his intention to attend a meeting of the Teetotal & Sons of Temperance, calling the anti-alcohol movement "the most glorious cause on earth."[85] He adopted the moral evangelism of the anti-alcohol movement, one of several such reform movements which were hallmarks of the civic concern and moral respectability of the urban middle-class in the antebellum period. Temperance also seems to have driven a wedge between Barnum and the Democratic party. In an

[83] William G. Shade, "Know Nothing Populism and the Origins of the G.O.P." *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, 71, 2 (2004), 228-230.
[84] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum*, 272.
[85] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Moses Kimball, 2 February 1848.

1852 edition of the *New Haven Advocate*, Barnum authored an editorial entitled "Appeal to the Democratic Voters of Connecticut." In this appeal, he defended his Democratic credentials recalling "having voted with and toiled for the Democratic Party faithfully and consistently ever since I became a freeman," but expressed his concern that members of his beloved party were not thoroughly dedicated to the temperance cause.[86]

> Possibly some few of the Temperance men have sometimes thought that the organization of a separate political party for the furtherance of temperance views would be *necessary*, but I, with many others, have continually combated this proposition. As a democrat, I loved, and still love my party, and dislike faction, and therefore I have continually urged our Temperance friends to make no political organization...[87]

Barnum goes on to defend temperance laws as reconcilable with democratic principles despite their tendency to infringe upon the property rights of private citizens. Barnum's participation in temperance, which included lectures he delivered himself before concerts and in the Museum lecture hall, suggests a change in Barnum's ideas about his responsibility as a public figure. While he certainly maintained a singular focus on the promotion of spectacles, Barnum seems to have been equally interested in presenting himself as a concerned citizen whose efforts, in show business and otherwise, were on behalf of the public good.

Barnum later directly connected his personal aversion to alcohol to the broader respectability of his Museum. In a circular letter to New York newspapers in 1850, Barnum announced that his Museum's renovations would include a lecture room with the intention of presenting "highly moral and instructive dramas," such as *The Drunkard, or The Fallen*

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[86] P.T. Barnum, "APPEAL TO THE DEMOCRATIC VOTERS OF CONNECTICUT," in *The New Haven Advocate,* 26 May 1852.
[87] Ibid.

Reclaimed, a popular temperance play.[88] He announced in the letter that no alcohol would be served at his establishment, and proclaimed:

> My whole aim and effort is to make my museums totally unobjectionable to the religious and moral community, and at the same time combine sufficient amusement with instruction to please all proper tastes and to train the mind of youth to reject as repugnant anything inconsistent with moral and refined tastes.[89]

Barnum was making a new bid at middle-class respectability for himself and his enterprises, trying here to differentiate his Museum from the raucous theatres of mid-century New York, which were often attended by "gamblers, prostitutes, drifters, and rambunctious youngsters."[90] Barnum wanted all New Yorkers to know that Barnum's American Museum was to be exclusively attended by "the *best class* of society."[91]

Notably, Barnum sent out this circular a year after the devastating Astor Place Riots of 1849. The riots, which took place just up the street from Barnum's Museum, were precipitated by a long-simmering feud between an American actor Edwin Forrest and British actor William Macready which, when exposed to the intense mid-century New York cocktail of nativist fervor, class resentment, and anxiety over the use of urban public space, exploded into violence.[92] The British Macready was set to perform Macbeth at the Astor Place Opera House, an upscale theatre generally attended by New York's elite. For the more working class fans of Forrest, Macready's performance for New York's gentile class represented aristocratic arrogance and foreign influence, with one ad in the *New York Herald* reading "Working men, shall Americans or English rule in this city? ...all Americans who shall dare to express their opinions this night, at

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[88] P.T. Barnum, Printed Circular Letter on Renovations to the American Museum, c. June 1850.
[89] P.T. Barnum, Printed Circular Letter on Renovations to the American Museum, c. June 1850.
[90] Neil Harris, *Humbug*, 36.
[91] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Robert Bonner, 5 February 1862.
[92] Dennis Berthold, "Class Acts: The Astor Place Riots and Melville's "The Two Temples,"" *American Literature* 71, 3 (1999): 429.

the English ARISTOCRATIC Opera House!"[93] The rioters, who were mostly working-class Democrats, viewed Macready as a "complex symbol of Whig elitism," drawing clear parallels between the British hereditary aristocracy and the wealthy American moralist class.[94] The riots were the deadliest episode of violence in the United States since the Revolution, necessitating the intervention of the local militia and resulting in around thirty deaths and many more injuries.[95] In the wake of the riots, the press expressed consternation over "hatred against the wealthy" and worried that if nothing had been done the city might have "fallen into the hands of lawless vagabonds."[96] The Astor Place riot was, in many ways, a violent expression of both the nativist and Jacksonian democratic sentiments for which P.T. Barnum expressed so much support in his early life. Barnum's statements in 1850 on the capacity for moral reform through entertainment displays a rhetorical shift away from the everyman, anti-establishment politics of his Connecticut youth. Barnum, in those statements and others, must have had episodes like the Astor Place riots in mind in his broad appeal to the ascendant middle-class, using the language of moral reform to soothe their anxieties around the prospect of entertainment as a source of social unrest and lower-class bad behavior.

Barnum on Race and Slavery Before 1860

On the moral issue of abolition, an issue which would soon become a central aspect of his political identity, Barnum seems to have fluctuated between distaste and indifference before the mid-1850s. Barnum biographer Robert Wilson describes the young Barnum's indifference on the

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[93] *New York Daily Herald*, 10 May 1849, 4.
[94] Dennis Berthold, "Class Acts: The Astor Place Riots and Melville's "The Two Temples,"" *American Literature* 71, 3 (1999): 429.
[95] Ibid.
[96] *New York Daily Herald*, 16 May 1849, 1.

issue of slavery saying, "however racist most Americans both north and south were in the middle of the 1830s, a considerable number of them had long believed… that slavery was both immoral and intolerable. Barnum was not in this number…"[97] It seems that Barnum was convinced, as were many in the antebellum North, that slavery could and should not come to a sudden end. Though he was rarely explicit about this view, one episode reveals his position in clear terms. In one letter to the *New York Atlas* about his travels in Europe in 1845, Barnum recounted an argument he had with some Scotchmen while on a steamer to Glasgow. Barnum recollected that the Scottish passengers' assertion that, if it were not for the persistence of slavery, the United States would be "the greatest, best… nation in the universe." Barnum, apparently indignant, promptly reminded the men that slavery had been foisted onto the American continent by the English government. He then responded to their remarks in a manner reminiscent of a traditional southern defense of slavery, declaring that American slaves were "much happier than the starving workies" of Britain, and that the "rabid fanaticism of abolitionists" would "insitigate ignorant individuals to riot and bloodshed," and that such fanaticism was, in his opinion, "more reprehensible than slavery itself." Barnum went on to express his concern that "if the blacks were unceremoniously set free, and there was no army to protect the whites, the blacks would murder them and take possession of their property."[98]

In addition to these comments, Barnum's casually cruel approach toward the issue of race appears throughout his activities and writings in his early career. His willingness to participate in ventures like the Heth affair seems to fit with this picture of a Barnum who was not only not an abolitionist, but also someone with a generally uncaring attitude toward black people. In his first

[97] Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 42.
[98] P.T. Barnum to the *New York Atlas*, 16 February 1845.

pseudo-autobiographical writings, which he authored under the name Barnaby Diddledum, Barnum gave a fictionalized testament of his first interaction with the enslaved Joice Heth infused with racial stereotype, recalling that "she was exempt from all work- the horror of a negro. She enjoyed the Elysium of her race- idleness, to its fullest extent…"[99] He then gleefully described pulling out Heth's teeth in order to give the appearance of even more advanced age; an episode which may or may not have actually taken place.[100] Barnum's direct and jocular tone surrounding his "purchase" of Heth in these early writings reveal his willingness to ridicule racial others in the name of entertainment, and suggest an overall comfort with the racist ideology that undergirded slavery. Another episode from Barnum's European correspondence contributes to a picture of a cruel and racially prejudiced Barnum. During a performance by General Tom Thumb, Barnum recalled that a black man showed up with a white woman on his arm:

> The darkey was dressed off in great style, with gold chains, rings, pins &c., (n*****s always like jewels,)… I made General Tom Thumb sing all the "n***** songs" that he could think of, and dance Lucy Long and several "Wirginny breakdowns." I then asked the General what the negroes called him when he travelled south. "They called me little massa," replied the General, "and they always took their hats off too."… The General enjoyed the joke and frequently pointed his finger at the negro, much to the discomfiture of "de colored gemman."…[101]

In this episode Barnum expresses several of the common racial prejudices and anxieties of the period; the sexual threat Black men posed to white women, the idea that black people were somehow more preoccupied with material things than morally superior whites, and the ever-growing need to solidify hierarchy of the races in the antebellum

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[99] P.T. Barnum, *The Adventures of an Adventurer: Being Some Passages In the Life of Barnaby Diddledum*, ch. IV in *New York Atlas*, 1841.
[100] James W. Cook, *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader*, (Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 246.
[101] P.T. Barnum, Letter to the *New York Atlas*, 21 July 1844.

period marked by Tom Thumb's reminder the American slaves people always "took their hats off" to him.

As late as 1850, the same year Barnum disseminated his circular on the morality of his Museum, and the year Senator Henry Clay guided an uneasy nation to compromise on the issue of slavery's westward expansion, Barnum responded to allegations from the pro-slavery editor of the *Washington Union,* Thomas Ritchie, that Jenny Lind, the Swedish songbird whom Barnum was promoting around the country, had given money to an abolitionist society. He declared in a letter to Ritchie that Lind "never gave a farthing for any such purpose," and touted her "oft-expressed admiration for our noble system of government" as evidence that she would never "lend the slightest sanction to any attack upon the union of these states."[102] Barnum's expeditious and direct response to Ritchie demonstrates his understanding that outward support for abolitionism could mean harm for his business enterprises. It also reveals a startling willingness to include slavery in his definition of the fundamental "system of government" of the United States. Barnum was later mocked for his casual dismissal of abolitionism in *The Liberator*, which jokingly quoted him as saying that he had also spoken to "the late J.H. [Joice Heth]," and had determined that she also would never have "sanctioned, at any time during her prolonged life, any attack upon the Union of the States."[103]

As was the case for many northerners in the period after the Compromise of 1850, Barnum seems to have developed a more outspoken moral aversion toward slavery by the time the Kansas-Nebraska Act was passed in 1854. When the fugitive slave Anthony Burns, who had been recaptured in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act, was liberated by Boston abolitionists in

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[102] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Thomas Ritchie, 14 December 1850.
[103] *The Liberator*, 24 January 1851, 1.

1854, Barnum wrote to one David K. Hitchcock and asked if Burns would be willing to act in a display at his Museum for $500.[104] While Burns was never displayed at Barnum's Museum, this episode reveals an attempt at a different kind of racial display; one in which the subject would not be treated as a biologically inferior curiosity, but as a sympathetic exemplar of the injustice that Black people faced in mid-century America. Barnum seems to have recognized the marketing potential of northern moral outrage over fugitive slave laws, but also seen an opportunity to express his burgeoning support for abolitionism in his own peculiar and explicitly commercial way.

The attempt to display Anthony Burns reveals Barnum's deeply self-contradictory approach to issues of race in the 1850s, a decade marked by Barnum's promotion of several racial "nondescripts" such as William Cammell, a black man with vitiligo who Barnum claimed had discovered a seed that "converts the skin of a Colored person into the hue of a white man."[105] In 1855, Barnum also promoted a "Grand National Baby Show," in which "the finest white babies" compete for prizes, and held a simultaneous show for the "finest colored ones" that he did not publicize under his own name.[106] Frederick Douglass visited the "colored baby show" and determined that "The whole affair was a farce played at the expense of colored people."[107] Despite his continued promotion of exploitative racial display, Barnum expressed interest in abolitionism, and willingness to assert an anti-slavery position gradually increased through the 1850's. In 1855, Barnum wrote to a Boston abolitionist, the noted Unitarian minister and future member of the "Secret Six" who would fund John Brown's Harper's Ferry raid, Rev. Thomas

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[104] P.T. Barnum, Letter to David K. Hitchcock, 28 February 1855.

[105] Nathaniel Currier, Lithograph of William Cammell from *Barnum's Gallery of Wonders,* 1850.

[106] P.T. Barnum, Letter to *the New York Tribune*, 4 May 1855.

[107] Frederick Douglass, "From Our Boston Correspondent," Frederick Douglass's Paper, 28 September 1855.

Wentworth Higginson, proudly stating that his wife Charity's "hatred of slavery is so strong" that the abolitionist teachings of the Unitarian church were "*too tame* for her."[108] Barnum reported his experiences in the South as a source of his own aversion to the peculiar institution, once recalling, "I have spent months on the cotton plantations of Mississippi, where I have seen more than one 'Legree'," referencing Simon Legree the violent slave owner from Harriet Beecher Stowe's wildly popular anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[109] In this letter from 1855, he seems intent on proving to Higginson, for whom Barnum seems to have had the utmost respect, that his personal and religious outrage toward the institution of slavery was both genuine and growing.

Man of Faith

The key to Barnum's final political conversion seems to lie in a combination of influence from his Unitarian faith and abolitionist friends and legitimate dismay at the heated political events of the 1850s. A year before Barnum rushed to deny rumors about Jenny Lind giving to abolitionist societies, the Compromise of 1850 had narrowly prevented the country from descending into crisis. The Compromise allowed California to enter the union as a free state but included a new Fugitive Slave Law, which strictly enforced the return of slaves who escaped to free states.[110] The Fugitive Slave Law was an outrage to abolitionist and free-soil elements in the North who saw it as a projection of "Slave Power" into free states. As such, the Compromise was far from a cure for the deep tension between the North and South over the issue of slavery. Notorious slavery advocate John C. Calhoun warned that the Compromise left the door open for a Northern

[108] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, April 1855.
[109] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, April 1855.
[110] Eric H. Walther, *The Shattering of the Union* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 2004), xvii.

assault on the power of slave states and warned of future secession. Meanwhile, the anti-slavery senator and future Secretary of State William H. Seward objected to the Compromise for capitulating to the threats of the South and called for the end of "the sin of slavery."[111] Seward's objections would lay the groundwork for the dissolution of the Whigs in 1856 and the eventual rise of the more explicitly anti-slavery Republican Party, which was founded in 1854. Tension would boil over into violence in 1854 with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which effectively repealed the 1820 Missouri Compromise and reopened the question of slavery in the West. Soon pro-slavery and abolitionist insurgents were killing each other in what would become known as Bleeding Kansas. The reaction to the violence in Kansas was intense in New York City, where a meeting of nearly 3,000 people was held to raise money for the cause of a free Kansas, and vast sums of money were raised to send arms to anti-slavery forces.[112] As was the case for many Northerners, the horror of political violence between Americans seems to have affected P.T. Barnum deeply and made him question his allegiance to a party that was increasingly stubborn in its defense of slavery. He later wrote, "The Kansas strifes, in 1854, shook my faith in my party."[113] Barnum remained a Democrat even then, however, refusing to renounce the party to which he had dedicated so much of his life.

On some level, Barnum's final political transformation seems to have derived from a deep-seated desire for approval from the moralizers Barnum befriended through his involvement in temperance and the Unitarian Church. In combination with personal financial trouble, these influences incited a period of genuine reflection on his activities up to that point in his life. One

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[111] Eric H. Walther, *The Shattering of the Union* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc, 2004), xvii.
[112] Ibid, 89.
[113] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 238.

of the founders of the Republican Party was Barnum's close personal friend and publisher-extraordinaire of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley. Greeley, another transplant from rural New England to the boomtown of 1830s New York City, was an ardent abolitionist who would famously implore President Lincoln in his 1862 piece "The Prayer of Twenty Millions" to "fight Slavery with Liberty" in an appeal for the emancipation of Confederate slaves.[114] Greeley and the *Tribune* often represented the perspective of the powerful class of high society moralizers in mid-nineteenth century New York who tended to be involved in the various reform movements that were in vogue in the decades between the Panic of 1837 and the beginning of the Civil War. In this period, support for temperance, membership in the Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor, contributions to the American Home Ministry Society, or well-broadcast abolitionist sympathies served as hallmarks of a kind of compassionate respectability; a way to show off that enviable combination of wealth and Christian virtue.[115] Barnum's association with people from this social ilk drew him deeper into the world of politically engaged Christianity. In the mid-1850s, especially after a period of financial insolvency due to poor investments in 1856, Barnum was in near-constant correspondence with religious men like family friend and Universalist minister Rev. Abel C. Thomas. After experiencing bankruptcy, Barnum declared that he had been "taught humility" and, in a letter to Rev. Thomas, wrote of his realization that the wise man "sees the hand of the good Father in everything."[116] These moments reveal a Barnum genuinely interested in reform, intent on changing his image as a money-worshipper, and concerned about the opinions of the people to whom he deferred for moral guidance.

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[114] Horace Greeley, "The Prayer of Twenty Millions," *New York Tribune*, 20 August 1862.
[115] Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the Bourgeoisie*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 75.
[116] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Rev. Abel C. Thomas, 9 March 1857.

Barnum's political maturation also seems to have been brought about as a result of his Universalist beliefs. Barnum believed earnestly in the fundamental tenants of Universalism that "holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected," and that all human-beings were destined for salvation through the infinite power of God. This belief was connected, for Barnum, to the idea that life on Earth should be enjoyed and that "the present life is the great pressing concern."[117] His religious convictions also presented the possibility of human perfectibility on Earth, a concept known as Christian meliorism, which proposed that men could improve through exposure to material that encouraged good qualities. As A.H. Saxon describes, "Barnum was both philosophically and theologically a meliorist," and that he believed in "perfectibility- an evolutionary process that, if not completed to everyone's satisfaction in the present world, might proceed at a more leisurely pace in the next."[118] For Barnum, the blurred boundary between the life on Earth and salvation must have functioned as a means of reconciling his personal success as a showman with Christian charity, as well as a means of recognizing the horror of slavery or any system that denied humans the right to enjoy the present. In his famous work the "Art of Money Getting" Barnum declared that money enabled "its possessor to enlarge the scope of human happiness and human influence," and that "money-getters are the benefactors of our race." In this statement Barnum explicitly connects financial success with charitable behavior, and closely ties human happiness with the values of personal industry that were widespread in the nineteenth century. These religious ideas seem to be at the root of Barnum's intent to use his museum and, later, his circus, as a means of entertaining and educating the public. In reference to Barnum's relative evolution on race, these beliefs also anticipate an approach to racial difference

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[117] P.T. Barnum, "Why I am a Universalist," 1890 in *Why I Am a Universalist and Tracts* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1896) 1-10.
[118] A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 3.

that can, at once, arbitrarily consider non-whiteness an example of human deficiency while not considering non-white people entirely unhuman or disqualified from the possibility of "improvement." Such a perspective, along with the increasingly anti-slavery position of the Unitarian church, must have influenced Barnum's transition toward abolitionism as well as his future promotion of new kinds of racial display.

Despite his efforts in the previous decade to "sanitize" himself and frame his museum as a moral temple of entertainment, he still struggled to change his public reputation as an amoral huckster. He once wrote, after delivering his speech in favor of suffrage for free Black men in Connecticut, "I have *striven* to do *good*, but (foolishly) stuck my worst side outside, until half the Christian community got to believe that I wore horns & hoofs... Let them show me as I am- and God knows that is bad enough!"[119] Barnum's spectacles were often met with suspicion if not disgust. When he promoted a "baby show" in 1855, in which babies were to be judged on beauty, one editor called it "intrinsically revolting."[120] Such characterizations seem to have made Barnum uncomfortable. In response to an unflattering biographical piece published in Britain, which accused Barnum of "duping" his audiences to make money, he wrote, "I should dislike to be thought so poor a student of human nature as to believe that money can be made from the public without giving a full *equivalent* therefor. I don't believe in 'duping the public,' but I believe in first attracting & then pleasing them."[121] He added that he intended to send the unflattering piece to a friend of his in the clergy who could vouch for his upstanding character. Overall, Barnum's frustrations with his negative public image, the influence of friends who supported moral reform movements, and his keen sense of the potential commercial benefit of

[119] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Theodore Tilton, 29 May 1865.
[120] *New York Daily Herald*, 12 May 1855, 7.
[121] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Messrs. R. Griffin & Co., 27 January 1860.

being perceived as a man of character, seem to have combined with the political moment of the 1850s to push Barnum to a political reckoning.

The War and Beyond

Though it is difficult if not impossible to determine the precise source of P.T. Barnum's Republican, abolitionist passion in the war years and beyond, it is clear that his political feelings became deeper than any marketing tactic or passing reputational concern. His positions on slavery, for example, did little to add to his popularity or profitability, and were not generally popular in the heavily Democratic environment of New York City or of his native Connecticut where he lived throughout the war. Barnum claims in his autobiography that he was "frequently threatened with personal violence" for his views.[122] After the New York Draft Riots of 1863, when Irish immigrants and working-class whites too poor to buy their way out of compulsory service expressed outrage at the unfair draft system and perceived competition from free Black workers, Barnum and other pro-Union, anti-slavery advocates feared for their safety. Volunteer soldiers came to guard Barnum and his family several times during this period, and he was provided with rocket flares by his friends to fire into the sky in case he found himself in real danger and required immediate assistance.[123] The resolute Barnum never faltered in his political convictions or in his desire to entertain throughout the war. In fact, Barnum was convinced that his efforts as a showman were crucial to the Union cause. He wrote in 1862, "...I work as hard as ever and love it. My business thus far has been good all through the war, but if needs be I am

[122] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum*, 240.
[123] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum*, 240.

willing to be reduced to the last shirt and the last dollar - yes, and the very last drop of blood - in case that will help preserve this nation as one and inseparable..."[124]

Barnum's biggest wartime spectacle was the staged wedding of the famous dwarves General Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren in February of 1863. Dubbed the "fairy wedding," it was a hit with New Yorkers drained by the war effort. Barnum recalled giddily that "every place in the church" was going to be filled for the sensational ceremony.[125] His Museum was in operation throughout the war, and was so widely understood as a symbol of Union patriotic fervor that Confederate spies endeavored to burn it down on November 25th, 1864.[126] The fire at Barnum's American Museum was set as part of a large, coordinated sabotage attempt by Confederate agents who intended to start a conflagration that would reduce much of New York City to ashes. The flames at Barnum's Museum were, however, discovered quickly and, after the lecture hall was evacuated, the fire was extinguished and the conspirators promptly arrested.[127] Barnum proceeded to declare his tongue-in-cheek victory over the Confederate spies by displaying a wax figure of one of the soon-to-be-executed arsonists, Robert Cobb Kennedy, in his Museum.[128] When the war came to a close the following spring, Barnum desperately tried to get his hands on the mythical petticoats in which the fleeing Jefferson Davis was said to have been caught. He sent a telegram to Secretary Edwin M. Stanton offering to "give five hundred dollars to Sanitary Commission or Freedman's Association" in exchange for the "petticoats in which Jeff Davis was caught."[129] Upon realizing such an artifact did not exist, Barnum, undeterred, placed the apocryphal petticoats on a wax figure of the former Confederate president

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[124] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Thomas Brettell, 10 October 1862.
[125] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Mr. Morse, 7 February 1863.
[126] Robert Wilson*, Barnum*, 209.
[127] *New York Daily Herald*, 27 November 1864.
[128] Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 210.
[129] P.T. Barnum, Telegram to Edwin M. Stanton, 15 May 1865.

in his Museum. When another fire struck the Museum in 1865, the wax figure of Jefferson Davis was tossed out the window into the crowd below prompting the spectators to break into an impromptu rendition of the Union hymn "John Brown's Body."[130] Barnum's Museum and its contents were, even in a moment of disaster, symbolically tethered to the Union cause. Later in 1865, having rebuilt his museum, Barnum ran for his seat in the Connecticut state legislature to represent Fairfield. He did so in order to have the opportunity to vote for the ratification of the 13th Amendment, but went well beyond this goal by fighting for universal male suffrage and targeting railroad monopolies. By this time it was clear that the young Barnum suspect of institutions and largely unbothered by politics was no more.

The Elder Statesman

When P.T. Barnum ran for Congress in 1867 his candidacy quickly became the subject of ridicule. As Barnum's campaign struggled in Connecticut, Samuel Clemens, who, under the pseudonym Mark Twain, had risen to the status of literary celebrity with the publication of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" just two years prior, wrote a review of Barnum's second American Museum. He complained about the lack of variety, the fact that the ferocious animals were almost always asleep, and the general lack of promised human curiosities that were limited to "two dwarfs, unknown to fame, and a speckled negro."[131] Clemens completed his review by asking "why does not some philanthropist burn the museum again?"[132]

In a separate editorial for the *New York Express*, Mark Twain declared that he had been sent "from the spirit land" an advance copy of P.T. Barnum's first congressional speech. Twain

[130] Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life,* 211.
[131] Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), *Alta California*, 9 April 1867.
[132] Ibid.

imagined Barnum using his political pulpit as a means of advertisement, declaring "shall I revel in luxurious indolence when [any] voice should sound a warning to the nation? No! Because the wonderful spotted human phenomenon, the leopard child from the wilds of Africa is mine."[133] Twain's exaggerated Barnum goes on to lament the state of the nation under Andrew Johnson: "Where is the poor negro! How hath he fared? Alas! His regeneration is incomplete; he is free, but he cannot vote; ye have only made him white in spots like my wonderful leopard boy from the wilds of Africa!"[134] The imagined congressman Barnum is sure to remind his esteemed colleagues at every turn that admission to his new museum remained only thirty-five cents.

Barnum's attempt at a national political career may have been a joke to many of his contemporaries, a laughable attempt at crossing into the realm of the serious by a man whose track record ranged from the carnivalesque to the outright objectionable, but the political dimension of Barnum's life was anything but a sideshow stunt. As Twain's vision of congressman Barnum reveals, his fervent political positions on issues relating to Reconstruction were widely acknowledged, but were oftentimes interpreted by the public as little more than another route to public attention for the impresario. Barnum himself saw little difference between his promotion of entertainments and his political aspirations. Both were certainly opportunities to expand his brand, but they were also tools for contributing to society in a deep and lasting way. His efforts to legitimize his entertainment in the eyes of the moralist elite before the Civil War and his gradual transformation into a genuine abolitionist left Barnum with a sincere desire to reconcile his promotions with his progressive political convictions. In his 1865 book *Humbugs of the World*, Barnum asserted that his exhibition of humbugs was similar, both in methodology and ultimate effect, to a political campaign:

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[133] Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), *Daily Alta California* via *the New York Express*, 10 April 1867.
[134] Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), *Daily Alta California* via *the New York Express*, 10 April 1867.

> But need I explain to my own beloved countrymen that there is humbug in politics? Does anybody go into a political campaign without it? Are no exaggerations of our candidates merits to be allowed? No depreciations of the other candidate? Shall we no longer prove that the success of the party opposed to us will overwhelm the land in ruin?[135]

Here, Barnum frames his own shameless exaggerations as a means of improving society through wholesome and uplifting entertainment, just as a politician exaggerates and bloviates with the intention of eventually winning an election and implementing a set of policy goals.

Barnum's activities following his congressional defeat in 1867 seem to play to this theme of transforming the hyperbolic into the morally intentional. In the 1870s he would produce an extensive correspondence with Joseph Henry, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and donated both money and animal remains for research and exhibitions.[136] In 1875, he was elected mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut where he enforced strict "Sunday liquor laws" and encouraged his citizens to practice a moral lifestyle.[137] Eight years later, Barnum funded the construction of a museum of natural history at Tufts University and, in that same decade, expanded his circus and began to style himself the "Children's Friend."[138]

All of this activity suggests that Barnum was thoroughly concerned with his moral image and the effects of his influence, and, more significantly, that the common vision of Barnum as an amoral or cynical trickster is far from the reality of his later life. Barnum's grandiose intentions were clear when he wrote to Schuyler Colfax, Vice President under Ulysses S. Grant and a circus aficionado, in 1878, promising, "I would abandon show business if cash was my only reward. I want to *elevate* traveling exhibitions and *reform* them altogether, for they are an *important* power

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[135] P.T. Barnum, *Humbugs of the World,* (New York: Carleton, 1865) 12.
[136] A.H. Saxon, *Selected Letters of P.T. Barnum*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 199-203.
[137] Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973) 199.
[138] Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019),

for good or evil."[139] Seen in this light, Barnum's later racial displays and entertainments cannot be understood as occasional exceptions to his impassioned sense of Republican progressivism in the decades after the Civil War, but rather, must be considered as fundamental reflections of that moral vision.

[139] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Schuyler Colfax, 3 August 1878.

Chapter 3: The End of Reconstruction and The Ethnological Congress

Two Congresses

The last segment of Barnum's life was defined by what Neil Harris refers to as his "one enduring monument to fame, the legacy his name left to the future": the American circus.[140] The circus represented the culmination of Barnum's lifelong efforts in that it contained nearly all the elements of entertainment Barnum had ever promoted: performers who dazzled with near-impossible feats, human curiosities to ogle, a vast animal menagerie, and so on, all under one big top. In 1874, Barnum was promoting a circus show he called the "Great Roman Hippodrome" in New York City. It was a vast spectacle that featured chariot races, exotic animals and reenactments of historical battles and was billed as the "Event of 1874."[141] The Hippodrome opened with a procession Barnum dubbed the "Congress of Nations." This Congress, which was advertised as a meeting of all the world's empires, featured "1,500 men, women, children and trained animals, presenting a truthful representation of the sovereigns of all nations."[142] White performers, often in brown or blackface, adorned in the costumes of ancient and recent monarchs and emperors and functioned as a kind of global pageant. The regal figures on parade were not, however treated with the utmost reverence as one reporter declared, "the eternal fitness of things is destroyed in amusing style in Barnum's Congress of Nations, when the Pope of Rome indulges in a comfortable cud of fine-cut tobacco and Napoleon the First, in a fit of abstraction, wipes his nose with the back of his hand."[143] The procession seems to have been appreciated by audiences who greeted the Congress with "hearty applause." However, less than a decade after its debut,

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[140] Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), 235.
[141] Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 245.
[142] *New York Daily Herald*, 17 May 1874, 17.
[143] *Chicago Tribune*, 30 August 1874, 7.

Barnum would set aside the Congress of Nations for a different kind of global procession: the Ethnological Congress of Barbarous and Savage Tribes.

The Authentic Barnum

Against the backdrop of Reconstruction, from its early stages after the war to its unceremonious end in 1877, and in context with the rise of Jim Crow and racist pseudoscience in the latter third of the nineteenth century, Barnum's moral efforts in entertainment can be understood as the intentional reconciliation between progressive Republican ideas about race, industry and morality, and the tide of anxiety within his white middle-class audience about the economic and social implications of racial equality. Barnum's more serious approach toward politics and his desire to present himself as a charitable sponsor of the natural sciences combined with the industrial efficiency of his traveling circuses resulting in a particular frame for his racial exhibitions in the second half of his career. This frame, which held Barnum as a kindly and respectable if not entirely trustworthy elder statesman of spectacle, would have made exhibitions like the Ethnological Congress palatable both as a form of entertainment and as a genuine means of teaching modern biology or anthropology.

In this period, Barnum often had respected institutions and individuals advertise their support of his efforts and attest to their perceived credibility and instructive value. He asked the widely respected judge Oliver Wendell Holmes to attest to the veracity of his Greek Tattooed Man, writing "I simply desire the public to be assured by a gentleman so widely known & honored that my tattooed man is *genuine.*"[144] During his search for "150 specimens of semi-civilized, or rather *uncivilized*, living specimens" for his Ethnological Congress, Barnum found

[144] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Oliver Wendell Holmes, 19 June 1876.

that several diplomats were "reluctant" to let native people leave their borders, so he asked Spencer F. Baird, the new Secretary of the Smithsonian, to put the trusted Institution's "big seal" on his requests.[145] Baird, likely wary about angering such a prominent donor, obliged. The Smithsonian would also accommodate Barnum when he asked for authentic "clubs, ornaments, fishing or hunting tackle" to present with a group of Fiji "cannibals" he intended to present at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876.[146] With the visible support of preeminent statesmen and scientists of his time, Barnum could plausibly vouch for the educational value of his presentations. The endorsements from prominent and respected public figures with progressive pedigrees also meant Barnum's exhibitions could claim moral authority, particularly in cases of racial exhibition.

In a larger sense, these efforts reflected dual trends in the demands in the latter half of the nineteenth century; the search for authenticity and the need for a reestablished post-emancipation racial order. As more Americans wound up in population centers connected by a growing network of railroads in the second half of the nineteenth century and information became more freely available to all, the lines between educational, moral and sensational content became blurred. Displays that claimed to capture the natural or authentic world and bring it to their audiences were widely popular, and, in the 25 years after the Civil War, P.T. Barnum's circuses appealed to this desire on an industrial scale. The inclusion of racial displays in these circuses in the midst of Reconstruction and its aftermath represented the strange combination of paternalistic curiosity, fear and sense of separation white audiences felt toward Black and brown people in this period, and further cemented the centrality white, middle-class perspective in American popular culture.

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[145] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Spencer F. Baird, 25 October 1882.
[146] P.T. Barnum, Letter to Joseph Henry, 15 June 1876.

The Reconstruction Circus

The years after the Civil War were initially difficult for Barnum. The original Barnum's American Museum burned down in 1865 and his second museum, just as Mark Twain had once hoped, burned to the ground in 1868. His efforts to enter politics were seemingly stymied after his loss to his own cousin William H. Barnum in the congressional campaign of 1867, and his ability to recapture his previous success as a showman was far from assured. Barnum's idle days would not last long, however, as he was soon offered a partnership in a traveling circus run by William C. Coup.[147] This partnership resulted in Barnum's even more successful and consequential second act as a promoter. No longer confined to New York City, Barnum's brand of bombast was now unleashed on cities and towns around the country. Barnum's extravaganza, while not the first circus in the United States, was by far the largest, best advertised and most organized in the history of American entertainment up to that point. Barnum took advantage of the ever-growing rail network that had nearly doubled in size since the Civil War began and, after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, connected the nation from coast to coast.[148] Performers and animals were transported on a sixty car long train from town to town in a logistical project that rivaled, as Neil Harris notes, "military mobilization."[149] Barnum's circuses were preceded by a deluge of advertisements pasted by an advance team who would arrive days before the performers, and his big top performances often featured multiple simultaneous acts that overwhelmed the senses of the average spectator. The circus itself seemed to capture the industrial efficiency of the age with the *Times of London* declaring the show to be

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147 Robert Wilson, *Barnum: An American Life,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019), 232.
148 *American Experience*, "The Circus" aired October 19, 2019, on PBS.
149 Neil Harris, *Humbug,* 238.

reminiscent of the "'machinery in motion' section of the Paris Exhibition" and claiming that the expertly coordinated presentations appeared "almost as complicated as a railway timetable."[150]

One of Barnum's major personal contributions to the business of traveling shows was his insistence on transforming the often disreputable circus into a morally uplifting form of family entertainment not unlike his original Museum. In order to dispel any lingering suspicions toward itinerant performers or the circus, which up to that point had been considered a more raucous affair marketed to adults, Barnum prohibited drinking on the premises, advertised exhibits as moral and uplifting, and hired enforcers from the Pinkerton detective agency to prevent burglary or misbehavior.[151] As Barnum described, "no gambling- no 'prize packages,' no deceptions- by my own people or my camp followers, or immoral practices of any kind, are allowed in or about my show."[152] In his promotion of what he was by then confidently calling the "Greatest Show on Earth," Barnum proudly reiterated his intention to "make the world better" and declared his menagerie a "vast living school of instruction."[153] The combination of the mobility, respectability and visibility of Barnum's circus made it a massive success ensured Barnum's status as a living legend in his own time.

A Second Revolution

If the years after the Civil War were a time of rapid change for P.T. Barnum, they were also a period of rapid evolution for the United States. President Abraham Lincoln, the savior of

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150 *Times of London*, 12 November 1889.
151 *American Experience*, "The Circus" aired October 19, 2019, on PBS.
152 P.T. Barnum, *Barnum's Illustrated News*, "A Rule Never Broken," (Buffalo: Courier Company Show Printing House), 1879.
153 P.T. Barnum, *Barnum's Illustrated News*, "P.T. Barnum's Address to his Patrons and the Public On the inauguration of his one and only GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH," (Buffalo: Courier Company Show Printing House), 1879.

the Union and champion of the Thirteenth Amendment was assassinated in April of 1865, and his successor Andrew Johnson proved unwilling to bring about Lincoln's vision for Reconstruction. Johnson's disregard for the goals of radical Republicans in congress, who endeavored to secure suffrage and citizenship for freed slaves before formerly Confederate states were readmitted into the union, eventually resulted in his impeachment trial in 1868. Affairs in the recently defeated South were even more complicated. Slaves were free, but were not granted land or sufficient means to pull themselves out of devastating poverty. The traditional slaveholding aristocracy was desperate to salvage their power and the newly formed Republican-majority governments in several Southern states, which often elected Black representatives, were a source of outrage for many whites. The nation, which, like P.T. Barnum, had gone through a period of wrenching political transformation during the course of the war, was now faced with questions about the definition of American citizenship and the path to national reconciliation.

The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, ratified in 1868 and 1870, respectively, were adopted in order to secure suffrage and citizenship rights for freed slaves. These constitutional changes were met with violent resistance by many whites in the South, many of whom lived in states that were majority Black. The Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1865 with the purpose of destroying the Republican-controlled reconstruction governments and preventing "Negro equality both social and political."[154] The Klan terrorized Black people and white Republicans until it was successfully suppressed by the Grant administration in 1871. In 1867, General John Pope, the military governor of the Third District headquartered in Atlanta, wrote to Ulysses S. Grant in order to express his concern that if Reconstruction was mishandled and Southern reactionaries allowed to prevail, freed Blacks would "relapse... into the same condition of

[154] *Organization and Principles of the Ku Klux Klan*, 1868, https://www.albany.edu/history/history316/kkk.html

bondage" from which they had recently been freed.[155] Clearly, the permanence of the end of slavery and the efficacy of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments was in question in the South for the first years of Reconstruction and required Northern vigilance in order to ensure meaningful enforcement.

The most pressing question facing the white voters in growing Northern cities during those years is well framed by historian Heather Cox Richardson: "How did Northerners expect the 4 million ex-slaves, the South's primary laborers, to fit into this American system?"[156] In referring to "this American system" Richardson means the abiding faith in free labor and free enterprise shared by most in the North and epitomized by icons of self-reliance and industry such as P.T. Barnum. While some white Northerners came to respect Black laborers during the war, most believed African-Americans to be naturally lazy, intellectually stunted and incapable of civic participation at the level of whites. These prejudices were shared by P.T. Barnum who, despite his advocacy for Black suffrage in Connecticut, held that freed slaves needed the "guidance" of whites in order to become full members of modern civilization:

> You may take a dozen specimens of both sexes from the lowest type of man found in Africa; their race has been buried for ages in ignorance and barbarism, and you can scarcely perceive that they have any more manhood than so many orang-outangs or gorillas. You look at their low foreheads, their thick skulls and lips, their woolly heads, their flat noses, their dull lazy eyes... But bring them into the light of civilization... teach them industry, self-reliance and self-respect; let them learn what too few white Christians have yet understood, that cleanliness is akin to godliness, and a part of godliness; and the human soul will begin to develop itself. Each generation blessed with churches and common schools, will gradually exhibit the result of such culture; the low foreheads will be raised and widened by an active and expanded brain; the vacant eye of barbarism, ignorance and idleness will light up with the fire of intelligence, education, ambition, activity and Christian civilization.[157]

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[155] *Charleston Daily Courier*, 20 August 1867.
[156] Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004),
[157] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking) (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 245.

Contained in this segment of Barnum's 1865 floor speech are several pseudoscientific assumptions that were common among whites in this period; most notably, the idea that proper religious and educational cultivation would result in changes in both intellectual capability and physical appearance of free Black people. The basic fear that Black people were stunted by circumstance or by nature and therefore would struggle to become productive drove the efforts of both racist southern Democrats, who pointed to this idea as evidence that freed slaves should not be allowed to vote, and the Freedmen's Bureau, which paternalistically reminded freed slaves that personal responsibility would be necessary for success. It was a truly national anxiety. As Cox-Richardson points out, the idea the freed slaves would have to learn to survive in a free labor economy particularly appealed to those who "expected them to fail."[158]

Such fear was, quite paradoxically, matched by concerns about African-American competition and the threat of retribution for slavery. Southern politicians framed Black men as sexual threats to innocent white women, and lower-class whites in the North feared an influx of Black labor in the years after emancipation. The ten percent of African-Americans who already lived in the North during this period faced a mixture of outright discrimination and demoralizing paternalism from both suspicious Democrats and some abolitionist Republicans. After the war, most Northerners tried to deemphasize the potential for a Black exodus to the North, concerned that it would pose a threat to labor markets and to white prosperity.[159] In this moment of perceived racial upheaval, there was a distinct need for reassurance about the security of the well-established concept of white supremacy which had undergirded white American society for so long.

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[158] Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 13.
[159] Ibid.

The pseudoscientific presentation of Black people as biologically inferior met this need. As historian James W. Cook explains, "without the institution of slavery to explain the position of African Americans at the bottom of the social hierarchy, other novel (and in many ways just as damaging) scientific justifications for America's ongoing racial caste system were sought and promoted."[160] P.T. Barnum's various human exhibits, such as the "What Is It?" and the Ethnological Congress promoted the basic concept that Black people were evolutionarily different from whites. In a review of the "What Is It?" exhibit, the *New York Times* determined, "the nondescript bears a striking resemblance to a malformed African and a curious approximation to an orang-outang. The exhibitor states that he was caught by a party of Gorilla hunters... if true, would indicate the existence of a new species."[161] By virtue of being presented by Barnum, who advertised his museum as a place of moral instruction, audiences were encouraged to conclude that the natural sciences affirmed long-held prejudices. Even in cases when audiences doubted their legitimacy, with the *New York Clipper* insisting that the "What Is It?" was nothing more than an "idiot negro boy," the basic proposition that Black people were strange or different and that the races could be scientifically categorized remained a driving factor in the continued patronage and credulity of Barnum's audiences.[162] The same review from the *Clipper* admitted that the "What Is It?" was one of Barnum's best humbugs as it was a "plausible one."[163] Some of Barnum's exhibits such as the Albino twins or the "Leopard Boy" played to the common fantasy that Black people could "become white," and suggested that there was room for Black people to "improve" through the loss of their blackness. Barnum's own dedication to Universalist meliorism perhaps contributed to these exhibits which suggested that

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160 James W. Cook, *Art of Deception*, 151.
161 *New York Times*, 5 March 1860.
162 *New York Clipper*, 31 March 1860.
163 *New York Clipper*, 31 March 1860.

may be possible for whites to assist Black people in their transition out of ignorance and into Christian society, which would, over time, diminish their spiritual and perhaps even physical blackness. In a sense, Barnum's racial exhibitions were not just semi-believable entertainments, but also reflections of a very real moral and political position that Barnum held and promoted: white American culture was the greatest on Earth, and African-Americans, who existed decidedly outside of this culture, would need to evolve with white assistance in order to enjoy its myriad benefits.

Barnum's racial humbugs, in this way, allowed Northern whites like Barnum to combine racial prejudices with an often earnest desire to do right by recently freed people in the wake of the war. They sustained Northern white paternalism during Reconstruction, and encouraged a sense that whiteness would not lose its distinctly important advantages after the destruction of slavery. By reinforcing the dehumanization of Black people through entertainment, Barnum helped Americans reassure themselves about the basic moral and biological rightness of white supremacy, which free enterprise would leave intact as Black people, constrained by their perceived inherent inferiority, would struggle in the post-war economy. Barnum's displays, in this way, did not demand that slaves be denied civil rights and legally treated as second class citizens, but rather proposed that racial egalitarianism was either undesirable, attainable only after generations of exposure to white cultural life, or practically impossible.

Scientific Racism on Display

The Ethnological Congress represented the final stage in the changing format of Barnum's racial displays. It largely abandoned the mode of humbug in favor of a more quasi-pedagogical approach featuring a carefully arranged human taxonomy. Rather than encouraging discussion

among audiences by leaving room for ambiguity, Barnum advertised the Congress as featuring real indigenous people in accurate, traditional costumes. In contrast to Joice Heth who told stories and sang, or William Henry Johnson as the "What Is It?" who would speak in a false gibberish with his visitors, members of the Congress were made to silently process in front of their observant audiences. In bringing representatives of the mysterious and "savage" peoples of the world to the curious West, Barnum underscored the central position of the white American bourgeois perspective, and firmly drew the line between productive civilization and the backwards racial Other. The exhibit allowed audiences to engage with their curiosity in the fetishized idea of the "uncivilized" world while ensuring that the boundary between observer and observed was comfortably rigid. As Bluford Adams describes,

> Barnum's shows' racial reconstructions carried contradictory implications for the US's domestic politics in an age when the circus was widely received as a model of industrial discipline. The Orientals offered white patrons a safely mediated access to the passion, poetry, and violence they had supposedly sacrificed to Western progress.[164]

In other words, Barnum's circus acted as a travelling representation of a largely one-sided dialogue between the values of the industrial middle class and the romanticized "noble savages" of the global racial underclass. The Ethnological Congress provided a kind of attractive naturalistic authenticity that was lacking in late nineteenth-century urban life, while simultaneously reaffirming the basic idea that white Christian civilization could comfortably and rightly distinguish itself from the dark, ignorant world beyond. As Adams further describes, "the Ethnological Congress was largely concerned with proving the clarity and permanence of racial categories."[165]

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[164] Bluford Adams, "A Stupendous Mirror of Departed Empires: The Barnum Hippodromes and Circuses, 1874-1891" *American Literary History,* Vol. 8, No. 1 (1996), 35.
[165] Ibid. 42-43.

The Congress premiered first in 1884 at the fashionable Madison Square Garden in front of an audience of "the press and the clergy" and achieved "customary success" with the crowd of social leaders.[166] The Congress was, in turn, generally well received in the press around the country. The *Buffalo Sunday Morning News* wondered at the Congress as "something hitherto unattempted in the annals of the circus profession," and praised the authentic costumes and tools the participants carried from which "the best ideas may be gathered of the appearance of the inhabitants of these faraway countries."[167] The *Philadelphia Inquirer* called the Congress "extraordinary" and "one of the greatest undertakings of a life made up of gigantic ventures."[168] The widespread appreciation of the Congress reflected the culmination of the process of pseudoscientific racial redefinition in the period after the collapse of Reconstruction and anticipated the rise of legal segregation and American imperialist fervor in the 1890s. The Congress presented a kind of imperialism as spectacle, physically bringing the "uncivilized" into "civilization," but combined with a distinctly Barnumesque political outlook. The non-white, non-western people of the Congress were wondrous and attractive, and the audience could ogle the authentic weapons and costumes of the "barbarous" tribes and feel a sense of distance, perhaps combined with a paternalist sympathy for those who were on the outside of the boundary between civilization and savagery.

"Savagery" was the focus of the Congress with the main advertised draws of the procession being the band of "Australian Cannibals," whom Barnum claimed "gorged themselves on each other's flesh" if left to their own devices, the "Wild Moslem Nubians," billed as a tribe of "warriors," and "ferocious Zulus," which Barnum advertised as examples of warfare

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[166] P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1889 final version with "Golden Rules for Moneymaking), (London: Routledge & Sons, 1889), 359.
[167] *Buffalo Sunday Morning News*, 3 August 1884, 4.
[168] *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12 April 1884, 3.

as the "only reflex of the savage black man in his native haunts."[169] Other attractions included a group of "Dusky, idolatrous Hindoos," horse-mounted "Haughty Syrians," Nautch dancing girls, whom Barnum claimed were "Slaves to the Gods," and a fierce group of "indomitable Afghans."[170] Intermixed in Barnum's advertisements were assertions that indigenous peoples were variably dangerous, untamed, noble, lascivious, devout, innocent and ignorant. Barnum described Black and African groups in the least reverential manner, mostly pointing to their perceived natural tendencies toward violence and ignorance in the absence of exposure to civilizing forces. It seems clear that Barnum's white audiences would have readily connected the presentation of African peoples with their ideas about Black Americans. Barnum also claimed, echoing the sentiment that exposure to civilization could contribute to the improvement of non-white peoples, that the members of the Congress, "degraded, bigoted, and embruited as they are," could "respect and appreciate and can not only be influenced, but successfully governed by honesty." These presentations were colored with explicit references to their educational value, not only for lay-audiences but for the academic world as well. One advertisement read, "Pope in his celebrated essay, declares that, 'the proper study of mankind is man,' and never before has such an opportunity been vouchsafed for the pursuit of that study as is afforded by the tribal assemblages of strange and savage beings in the Ethnological Exhibition of the Great Barnum and London Shows."[171]

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[169] "Courier: P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth combined with the Great London Circus for Jackson," August 28, 1884, 8-10. https://collections.ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/110002%3A4145#page/10/mode/1up

[170] Ibid, 8-9.

[171] "Courier: P.T. Barnum's Greatest Show on Earth combined with the Great London Circus for Jackson," August 28, 1884, 8-10. https://collections.ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/110002%3A4145#page/10/mode/1up

The Congress debuted in a period when the discipline of anthropology was becoming increasingly defined and professionalized, with the Bureau of Ethnology established in 1879, and graduate programs in anthropology established at Harvard and Columbia in 1890 and 1896, respectively.[172] Around the same moment Barnum was becoming an increasingly central donor to causes related to natural science, founding the Tufts Museum of Natural Science in 1884 with a gift of $55,000 and becoming the most generous benefactor of the Bridgeport Scientific Society.[173] The Congress played explicitly to the anthropological discussions of the time; particularly the debates between supporters of monogenesis, the idea that all humans derive from a single ancestor, and polygenesis, the racialist conception that different populations of humans derive from unique sources. Barnum's ethnological spectacle represented a kind of mediation between the professional, academic methodology of anthropology, bolstered by the tacit approval of representatives from the Smithsonian, as well as by the popular ideas of racial difference already held by white American audiences. In contrast to the "What Is It?" exhibit, when Barnum specifically avoided any attempt to answer scientific questions, the Ethnological Congress represented a more pedagogical categorization of racial groups who were made intentionally and easily identifiable for the white audience. The Ethnological Congress and Barnum's other racial displays had such an effect on popular understanding of anthropology that they inspired similar presentations in the following decades and left a lasting impact on the relationship between popular entertainment, racial politics, and the social sciences.

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[172] Nancy J. Perezo, Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 8-9.

[173] *The New York Times*, "The Great Showman Dead," 8 April 1891, 1.

Beyond Barnum

Though the Ethnological Congress was far from the first human zoo-like exhibit in the West, the scale, popularity and ambitious "diversity" of the display was unprecedented, and was the first exhibit of its kind that most Americans had ever seen. It reflected a model of immersive racial exhibition that was becoming popular around the time of Barnum's Congress and would become common in the years following its premiere in 1884 and long after Barnum's death in 1891. In his essay "Ota Benga and the Barnum Perplex," essayist Harvey Blume identifies the Ethnological Congress as a sort of "dress rehearsal" for the mass displays of human beings that would spike in popularity around the turn of the century.[174]

The format of human "ethnological" display was particularly common on the fairways of the wildly popular World's Fairs of the era, which had the intended mission of displaying the achievements of the industrial West. These expos provided audiences with a sense of the unknown world while achieving the synthesis of scientific wonder and pure entertainment. One way of bringing the world as "authentically" as possible to curious patrons of these events was through the display of live human beings. The 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, which took place just five years after the premiere of the Ethnological Congress in 1884, featured a "negro village," and the famous Chicago Columbian World Expo included villages of both Native Americans and Africans which white patrons could stroll through and feel momentarily immersed in the primitive world.[175] Perhaps the largest example of a Congress-like exhibit was at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition and concurrent Summer Olympics in St. Louis in 1904. The exhibition, meant to flaunt the achievements of the American West in the one hundred years

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[174] Harvey Blume, "Ota Benga and the Barnum Perplex" in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, ed. Bernth Lindfors, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 188.
[175] Raymond Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870-1930" ??

since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, featured 1,200 "Filipinos, Ainu, Eskimo, Native Americans, Zulus and Pygmies" all placed in human exhibits fashioned to look like their indigenous settings.[176] One of the pygmies who was brought to the Fair, named Ota Benga, would later feature in an exhibit supported by the eugenicist Madison Grant at the Bronx Zoo where he was put in a cage alongside orangutans and described as a missing link in a manner reminiscent of Barnum's "What Is It?"[177] The Ota Benga exhibit, like Barnum's displays, aroused the curiosity of middle class patrons. The *New York Times* reported in 1906, "What Is Ota Benga?: One Who Has Explored Suggests That the Supposed Pigmy Is a Hottentot."[178] Clearly, as much as Barnum took cues from the world of science, anthropologists and eugenicists at the turn of the century began to take cues from Barnum, incorporating participatory spectacles that attracted mass audiences and influenced their ideas about the world.

The format of ethnological display rose in popularity at the same moment formal, legal separation of the races was becoming commonplace throughout the nation but especially the American South. Despite the fact that the Civil Rights Act of 1875, a Republican priority which Barnum likely supported, had banned racial segregation in accommodations, the removal of federal troops from the South in 1877 allowed Southern whites to reinforce separation laws. The landmark 1896 Supreme Court case Plessy v. Fergusson, which overturned the Civil Rights Act and saw "separate but equal" upheld as a legal doctrine, paved the way for legal segregation to take root for the next seventy years. While the Ethnological Congress and the displays it inspired did not make any explicit political arguments, their reliance on a clear separation between white observers and non-white indigenous subjects seems to suggest the natural formal separation of

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[176] Harvey Blume, "Ota Benga and the Barnum Perplex" in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, ed. Bernth Lindfors, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 199.
[177] Ibid.
[178] *The New York Times*, 24 September 1906, 7.

the races in the form of anthropological category. Formal segregation, which Barnum likely would have found reprehensible had he lived long enough, grew out of the same need for reinforced racial boundaries that Barnum directly appealed to with the Ethnological Congress. In this way, the Congress reflects the root of the failure of Reconstruction. Northern and Southern whites alike could not fathom actual, functional equality between the races because of a combination of long-held prejudices, anxieties over competition, and commonly held notions that whiteness was connected with personal virtue. Barnum's pseudoscientific exhibitions reinforced these feelings in making human beings objects of "study," made to seem removed from any participatory role in civilization and present only to be observed.

Fig. 1. "The Barnum and Bailey greatest show on earth--A glance at the great ethnological congress and curious led animals," Advertisement Poster featuring the Ethnological Congress appearing next to the Animal Menagerie, Cincinnati & New York: Strobridge Lith. Co., 1895.; from Library of Congress digital collection.

Conclusion

P.T. Barnum was far from an especially racist or unfeeling man for his time. His clear anguish over his perception as a shameless humbug, his involvement in the cause of abolition, and his earnest political evolution reveal his sensitivity and his desire to be a decent man, and his vocal advocacy for abolition and universal male suffrage suggest a Barnum who, for his time, was racially progressive. This assessment of Barnum's character, rather than absolving him from his consistent, and often cruel, exhibitions of Black and nonwhite people as racially inferior curiosities, reflects the manner in which racism was often folded deeply into Barnum's moral framework and that of nineteenth century America, more broadly. Barnum's racial exhibitions, which changed through his career from shocking humbugs into representations of what framed as scientific and anthropological reality, capture the evolution and difficult reconciliation of P.T. Barnum's moral and racial outlooks, but also those of much of the United States over the course of the nineteenth century.

Joice Heth captured the racial anxiety among New York City whites in the wake of abolition in New York State by essentializing the role of the Black woman as a subservient, maternal slave in the mythos of American history, reassuring audiences that such a role was not only acceptable, but natural for Black people. The "What Is It?" reflected the rise of Darwinist science as a tool of social oppression as well as the resentment toward the problem of race and slavery which was rapidly tearing the nation apart in 1860. The Ethnological Congress, in turn, displayed a distinct need for scientific racism to replace slavery as an institutional guarantee of white supremacy while simultaneously normalizing the perspective of the white middle-class Christian in contrast to the "barbarous and savage" people on display.

The changing format of these displays reveal how American racism shifted from a tool for the reinforcement of the institution of slavery to a more clearly defined construct of biological order which held white people to be uniquely capable of creating and succeeding in civilized nations. Barnum's own changing feelings toward race seem to reflect this model, having once been dismissive and hateful toward Black people, Barnum began to think of Black Americans as objects of sympathy by the end of the Civil War. This sympathy, however, was far from devoid of racist feeling, but was a reflection of moral paternalism which at once reaffirmed Barnum's desire for personal decency while considering non-whiteness to be a tragic, regrettable state.

The ability to appeal to the universal ideals of liberty and equality while consistently expressing a belief in the inherent inferiority of certain races is a uniquely American humbug. P.T. Barnum's ability to present Black people as beast-like, mysterious creatures while supporting the abolition of slavery and the Black vote is, in a sense, the prototypical version of this humbug. He did not promote violence or political inequality for Black people in specific terms, but rather appealed to the assumptions and anxieties about race that were present in himself and in his world. By positioning white audiences as observers and Black and "uncivilized" peoples as curiosities, Barnum designed a style of racial definition that went further than minstrelsy or purely academic pseudoscience. It was a model that gave physical form to the myth of white Anglo-Saxon biological superiority and democratized the racist anthropology of the period while allowing audiences to superimpose their own assumptions onto the racial spectacles they consumed.

The impact of Barnumism on popular conceptions of race had consequences long beyond the end of Barnum's life. The powerful combination of spectacular display, purported educational or moral intent and scientific racism present in Barnum's racial exhibitions

influenced the way non-white people were conceptualized in entertainment and politics for generations to come. From the Siamese Twin characters in Disney's "Lady and the Tramp," who were likely inspired by Cheng and Eng, two conjoined Thai twins promoted by Barnum during the 1870s, to 1940s barnstorming Black exhibition baseball teams like the "Zulu Cannibal Giants" who dressed as barbarian tribes, race as spectacle permeated American entertainment in the twentieth century.[179] White Americans have remained fixated on race in the century or so since Barnum's death, and, despite the dwindling support for racial pseudoscience, are often just as willing to accept consistent depictions of Black inferiority in entertainment and media as Barnum's audience. The fears and interests of nineteenth century middle-class audiences are not so different from anxieties about Black Lives Matter, mass immigration, or the perceived decrease in the political superiority of white people in the twenty-first century United States. Entertainment in the contemporary era reflects the fact that Barnumist racial display has become commonplace.

White Americans still gravitate toward reassurance about their position relative to the non-white other. Other examples of the legacy of Barnum's racial displays in politics and culture include the chief of the LAPD referring to Black residents of Los Angeles as "monkeys in a zoo" in the wake of the 1965 Watts Riots or the media frenzy the crack-cocaine crisis of the 1980s and 90s, when Hillary Clinton referred to young Black drug dealers as "super-predators" and Reverend Wendell Foster, a Black member of the New York City council, declared that if he could he would "borrow the Ringling Brother's cages and cage these drug pushers and exhibit them in all the neighborhoods so the kids can see scum."[180] The sensation over "inner-city" drug

[179] Sarah L. Trembanis, *The Set-Up Men: Race, Culture and Resistance in Black Baseball* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2014), ch. 6.
[180] *Crack: Cocaine, Corruption and Conspiracy*, directed by Stanley Nelson (2021, Los Gatos: Netflix)

use during the worst years of that crisis and the willingness to dehumanize Black people was heavily reminiscent of the racial sensations of Barnum's years. The allusions to science in this period, particularly the quasi-scientific moral panic about drug-using Black mothers giving birth, featured elements of reducing non-white people to subhuman spectacles in need of assistance or reform. Even today, the manner in which commentators describe Black athletes as "naturally talented" or physical "specimens," or the tendency to refer to Black protesters as "thugs" or "animals" harkens back to the emphasis on the bestial nature of Black people in Barnum's human exhibits, and places the white perspective as the normative center of the American cultural experience.

An expansion upon the ideas presented here would be a more thorough comparison between Barnum's racial exhibitions and blackface minstrelsy, the other major form of American race-based entertainment whose legacy is discussed more often and is sometimes more apparent. This comparison which is attempted only in brief moments in this thesis would help to isolate the unique features of each tradition while also contributing to a larger narrative of how racial ideas of the nineteenth century reproduced themselves in entertainment for generations to come. It would also likely prove useful to explore the relationship between scientific racism and entertainment beyond Barnum, and to explore how eugenics are related to popular ideas about racial difference as well as to the progressive tradition in America. In addition to these expansions, a paper which focused on the tradition of human exhibition in Europe in the period before and during Barnum's career would help to contextualize his activities in a manner which could only partially be achieved in this thesis.

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